

SRILATHA BATLIWALA (born 1952)

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[Interviewed by Laxmi Murthy]

Laxmi: So, hi, Srilatha. This is just for recording purposes. Thursday afternoon, we are talking to Srilatha Batliwala who is going to talk about her experiences in the women's movement – more than 30 years – 35 years – something like that. So what I would like you to do Srilatha is go back in time and remember incidents – moments, your feelings and your experiences of yourself and of people around you – your friends, family – the media if you like. You know, what exactly you were doing and you felt and what were people's reactions? The chronology of it need not be linear – you can remember later things, but concentrate on the late 70's and mid-'80s. So where were you in 80 for example – what were you doing? What you remember as your first women's meeting for example? Your first dharna?

Srilatha: That's exactly what I was thinking. I was thinking of the first sort of very heady experience of being in this big, march a morcha in Bombay. I was in Bombay at that time. I lived in Bombay and worked in Bombay from 1972 to about 1988. So, my first active participation in different kinds of women's movement processes was based there, but the first memory that I have and one that stays with me is the huge rally we had after the Mathura case and the big rally that was organized to protest against custodial rape. And which really began the process of challenging the rape law as it was at that time. And I remember joining the march – I can't, you know sort of name the exact location but I remember that being in the march right up to Flora Fountain and then all of us sitting around Flora Fountain. And it was really a huge, huge rally because I think there were more than 10,000 people who took part in it. And what was interesting about it was that it wasn't just women – we had a lot of men from a lot of the sort of progressive NGOs and civil liberties groups and so on. There were quite a few women from organizations in rural Maharashtra that took part because this issue of the way the police treated women specially when they went to register a complaint around any kind of offence involving a sexual assault - it was such a widespread and universal anger that the organizing of this...the organizers were able to mobilize people from all across Maharashtra. But I remember one very specific incident or experience during that rally. It must have been '81 or '82. The place where I was marching in the column –uh – we had a young policeman – a very young policeman. He must have been you know, 20, marching right next to us. Because of course, we had a police cordon around the marchers as well. One of the leading lights of the – let me call it the Marathi Women's movement – I think her name was Anu Tai – I don't remember her surname. She was just a little ahead of us and the slogan she was chanting and that we were repeating after her was '*Balatkar! Balatkar! Policeancha adhikar aso*' meaning "to rape, to violate, is the right of the police" and this young man who was marching next to us (laughs) was just red, you know, with shame and embarrassment. And at that moment I don't know why, somehow I felt very connected to him personally. And at some point, I was feeling so bad for him, god knows why, that I tapped him on the shoulder and I said to him in Marathi – I said

'don't feel bad, we are not saying it just about you'. And he just said 'No, No its okay, its okay' and I said but do you understand what we are saying that this should not be the right of the police. And he said – Yes, yes I agree with that. I said just imagine that if it was your sister, and something happened to her and she got treated like this. He said ' No no, yes yes, *nyay ahey* (it is just, what you're asking for). It was interesting because it was this heady feeling where for the first time, I experienced deeply the sense of being part of a movement because the diversity of the people in that march was huge, you know there were adivasi women. There were fisherwomen from the district where I used to work at that time and there were lots of middle class women. There were slogans in Hindi and Marathi and Gujarati and of course in English, and of course so many men. There was an incredible sense of being part of the movement.

L: Who had organized it?

S : It was organized by several organizations, but Forum was in the lead. But there was a lot of support from couple of Pune-based groups as well and there was a march in Pune almost around the same time. And Forum reached out too, in one of its, I think in a sense it was the kind of peak of Forum as it was at that time being very strategic in the way it did things. I remember it prior to that and after that, being very closed, and almost exclusionary in its approach. But that was a moment when they opened up – they reached out and they co-organised it. You know Chaya Datar's group was also very active. I don't know if I am digressing here...

L: No it's fine, go ahead.

S: Because at that time I think one of the sort of tensions was between groups like Chaya Datar's and groups like the Forum (phone ringing) Sorry I think it is mine –put it on silent "hello".

S: So the tension was around this whole sense of building a kind of indigenous analysis, a more sort of rooted feminist perspective on issues. And this was the heyday of the tension between what were called the radical feminists and the socialist feminists. And then there was a bunch of us who didn't know how to fit ourselves into those two categories. And there was this thing you know that radical feminists always raised the issues around individual issues like violence, equal wages and those kind of issues whereas socialist feminists were raising the more systemic issues around - you know the intersection of patriarchal and economic, and structural exploitation and oppression and stuff like that. So within that there were other layers including the one where there was a sense that a lot of the urban feminist groups were taking a very western perspective and a lot of the articulation and debates were in English, that they weren't really *speaking* to women in more grounded situations. So there was this whole question of you know, a kind of a "Marathi" feminism if you like, and they were trying to build an analysis from the ground up and people like Gail Omvedt, Chaya Datar and others were very much part of that tendency if you can call it that. So I think at that time there was this heady sense of all that having come together – and that this issue was much bigger than any faction or group, that it was a real unifier and brought people together in this kind of a strong political action. But for me that moment of also trying to explain – explain ourselves to that young man – that policeman, was for me symbolic of I think something that always troubled me or that I always carried within me as a very important objective

throughout my feminist political life – which is, how do we speak to the other, and how do we build those bridges, alliances and make it about changes that need sort of a broader base of support. And so that'll sort of take me to another...

L Just to interrupt - were you part of a group at the time?

S I had been to – I had tried to become part of the Forum. I had been to many meetings and so on. But I was a bit alienated, to be honest. And I think my sense of alienation was symptomatic of the immaturity that all of us were burdened with at that time. See, I felt somehow very unwelcome in those gatherings. Because I felt that women like me (disturbance- aeroplane). You know, this was a period of time, very early stage, a phase of the movement, let's call it, and it was a stage at which I think there was so much anger against men. A lot of the women who were founders of the autonomous women's groups like the Forum had come out of really terrible personal experiences. So there was anger. But I think that anger manifested umm in a rather...I mean in the wisdom of hindsight it is very natural that it came out in that form. But those of us who were living happily in heterosexual relationships always I think felt stigmatized – somehow that we were betraying the cause (laughs), by living in those very relationships that had been so oppressive to other women, you know. So I think I always felt and I was in that *really* typical hetero world of you know mummy, daddy, sonny and baby. You know I had two children who were very young at that time so I was in that whole early childhood mothering phase in my personal life. And then of course I was already carrying class guilt, I was carrying you know hetero guilt (laughs) and I was carrying the guilt of precisely being part of those structures that so many of the women were rejecting and so on. So that was on one side. But how much of this was real and how much of it was imagined – I really don't know, but in retrospect it was a bit of both. But the other side of it – I think the other tension I experienced was that I was actually working in a grassroots organizing, movement-building process. We had just co-founded SPARC or we were in the process of co-founding SPARC and so I was doing a lot of door-to-door organizing with women living in the pavement slums in South Bombay. So another part of me felt very angry and alienated that *that* space wasn't really, or that they were not giving space for discussion of the kinds of issues that people like me would liked to have brought to the table - of the kinds of issues the women we were working with were facing. So I think I felt excluded in these two ways.

L Which were what – more livelihood issues?

S No, not just livelihood issues. But why was housing a feminist issue? Why was security of tenure and the right to housing, the right to water, the right to toilets; of course also the violence that they faced. The whole syndrome of these women being the primary source of food security in their households, because it was their income which really fed the family. How do we discuss *these* issues in a feminist way. I think I was looking for a space for having those kinds of discussions. But the autonomous women's groups at that time were – well, why should I generalize I know of others at the time – but the Forum as a space wasn't very welcoming of those kinds of issues. I think in some theoretical way yes. But if I said how do we take this on board? How do we build a real feminist movement here? We were doing it very instinctively, intuitively, and so were the women. But that wasn't providing a kind of space where one could sharpen one's analysis, sharpen one's strategies, build a kind of critique say of urban policies. For them it was all kind of social work, you know. They didn't

really see the radical potential at all of what we were doing, which was really building a women-dominated, women-led movement for shelter and safe habitat and a right to a place in the city. Which was at that time really under question. It was: pick up all these people, force them to go back to where they came from. That was the kind of policy debate that was going on at the time in places like Bombay. "Why should Bombay be the country's orphanage? All these people have come from outside. And these pavement dwellers are all criminal elements." That the kind of thing. So I think the feminist aspect of that work was very difficult for them to understand. Whereas if I had been working, which I was earlier when I first started going to Forum - I was working in the Foundation for Research in Community Health and there you know issues around women's health, reproductive health etc were a better fit with whatever the critique was at that time. So that was not so uncomfortable. But when I really started getting involved in setting up SPARC and organizing the pavement women, then there was lot of discomfort. And I remember that there was a meeting at which you know the whole discussion had been around personal violence and domestic violence, basically marital violence and Rinku Bhattacharya's...

L Rinki...

S Rinku Bhattacharya's case and of course Flavia. Flavia was you know the cause célèbre at that time. But the interesting thing was that during that time, there were a couple of times when Flavia actually stayed at my house. But because she was a mother, she had children, we had actually built a very close bond, she and I. And I found Flavia much more open and ready to discuss issues which were burning me up then the rest of the group. But I remember that was also the time you know, very early eighties when Flavia went back to the marital household, was roundly criticized and rejected for doing that. And meeting her several times during that period, to talk about how the organization, or the group at the time, was almost violating the principle of women's right to take their own decisions, and women's agency, by creating a new kind of ideological prescription of how you had to behave in order to be a true feminist. So I think that was an interesting moment historically, because the movement had to struggle with that at that time. When you read histories of the early stage of the USSR post-revolution, you see that every revolutionary movement goes through that cycle. In the beginning there is a very strong party line, a few dominant voices who tend to overwhelm the others, there's a lack of tolerance for dissent or debate, there's a kind of monotheistic, rather fundamentalist kind of a tendency that takes over. Because I think the movement is struggling to keep its integrity, its ideological centre, just to keep that intact. So those were my early sort of...experiences.

There was just one more experience that I recount to bring this to a close. You know there were two incidents which kind of sealed the sense of alienation from at least the autonomous women's group model of the feminist movement. One was that two-three people from the Forum wanted to come to one of our community meetings. Pavement dweller organizing had advanced a little bit. And wanted to come and talk to the women about you know what they saw. And there was this really amazing conversation. Where, you know...by that time we had done about a year and half of very solid feminist popular education, consciousness raising with that core group of women in the pavement dwellers' movement. So these people came...and the conversation was basically, so, what are the women's issues in your community? Without skipping a beat the women said housing, security of tenure, shelter, toilets,

lighting and electricity, water, ration card...and the reason that ration cards were always raised was because they were always refused ration cards because they could not give an address. So this thing that because I live on the pavement, so I don't exist, I am invisible as a citizen. So five-six issues. And they said but these are not women's issues. So....Madina, Sagira said what do you mean? What are women's issues? What do *you* think are women's issues they asked the Forum. The Forum women said you know, like rape, molestation and domestic violence, triple talaq, divorce etc these are women's issues. And they were shocked and they said, "These are not women's issues. These are community issues." It was this complete 180 degree difference in what was the perception of what was a community issue. So then they actually had a very interesting debate. The Forum women said how can you call housing, water, etc and toilets and all women's issues – why are they women's issues? *They* should be community issues. They said no, because in the community, these are the things for which we are responsible as women (a) and (b) we are the ones who are worst affected. We are responsible for making sure that there is water in the house. We are responsible for cooking. We are responsible, we are the ones who get harassed. The way they put it in Hindi was most graphic. They said, "*Aadmi jo hai vo kahin bhi jake pishab kar sakta hai, kahin bhi ja kar tatti kar sakta hai. Aurat kar sakti hai? Nahi. Isliye toilet rehena auraton kee baat karna.*" There was that kind of analysis. They said, if we are being beaten, what is the point of only women taking it up? It has to be taken up by the entire community to make sure that women can live safely wherever they are. So there was this kind of an interesting debate which took place. But as a person listening to the debate and doing very minimal facilitation – I thought to myself – you know, these guys have a long way because they are coming in with a pre-conceived perception of what they want the women to say. And it was almost like there was a subtle kind of certification process going on to determine whether the work that these women from SPARC were doing was really feminist. And we failed. We didn't get the certification. That was very clear, that our consciousness raising had failed to make the women understand what were truly women's issues. So that was a turning point in my understanding – well do I really want to invest a lot of time and energy in belonging to a space where I will have to really put a lot of energy in educating them into why are they not hearing the women? I am not glorifying the women's perspective, but what the women were articulating was really smart. I think what the women were raising was worth considering and not to be dismissed. I was feeling, so how are we going to build a mass movement. Because for me by that time I was very clear that any kind of transformation whether it was in gender power or other power structures that intersect with it, it's not possible without mass movements. It can't be a small elite group changing laws and policies that's not going to penetrate. And we're still seeing that, we can change those things, and they're very important, it's important to have progressive laws, legal protections and so on, but unless there is also a demand for that at the community level, women and their families. I am thinking of the research that I did in the later 80s and mid-90s where it was so clear. When there is violence, where do women go first for justice? To the family elders. They are constantly negotiating within those informal systems or customary systems which is still steeped in a value system which is very antithetical to equality or rights of any kind for women. So I used to always feel how are we going to build a mass movement if we can't first of all listen, not really hearing what they're saying and trying to build from there. That was one moment.

The second was - this must have been in '86 or '87 – the first or the second National Women's Conference of autonomous...or feminist women. And one of the younger organizers from our group had gone to this meeting – it was held somewhere in Santa Cruz or something. Apparently they had a big debate whether SPARC should be invited, a couple of other organizations. And decided, no, they're not feminists, we won't invite them. And I was thinking at *that* time we already had the capacity to mobilize 15-20 thousand women overnight if there was a rally. We had that kind of mobilizing power as an organization. And had what I believed was a very feminist movement building agenda. And they were busy sitting there and deciding who to include and who to exclude.

And I think that's the memory that I bring to bear every time I think about or write about for instance the struggle sex workers have had for acceptance – it's the same thing. It's like shall we allow them a seat at the table – not understanding that there is big mass base there which you are missing by excluding. So it was after that time I decided that I didn't want to be part of that piece of the women's movement. Or let's say those structures I didn't necessarily want to be a part of. And then I guess that's what made me question and re-think who is the women's movement? Where is it? Who owns it – that sort of thing. And there was a classic conversation – I'm fast forwarding here a bit to say 1990 when we had I think first, the first, All India Mahila Samakhya summit. And it was in Baroda. Gujarat Mahila Samakhya hosted it that first year. And we were all in this school – one of these alternative schools' campus we used during the holidays. We were all staying there. And there was this one very heated conversation where a very famous – a well-known doyenne from one of the autonomous women's groups in Delhi asked me: What is your relationship – she asked me in my capacity as the State Programme Director of Mahila Samakhya, Karnataka – what is your relationship with the women's movement? And I think what I said, because the response came immediately – I didn't even have to think. But I think it came so clearly because of all the thinking I had done in between Laxmi on these question. Who is the movement, where is it? Who claims ownership of it? Who claims leadership of it? Who feels they have the power to do whatever they do? And those sorts of questions So I looked at her and said, 'We ARE the women's movement', what is your relationship to us? Because at that time, Karnataka Mahila Samakhya had mobilized well over a lakh women. In the three districts we were working – and I mean really mobilized. If I had told them tomorrow chalo for a rally to Bangalore – they would have been doing 'bus bharo' and 'rail bharo' and they would have been here, you know – they were really! This is just that core that was alive and alert and in the process. So I felt that, what are you talking about! Why do you feel that some ten of you who are in this group sitting in Delhi or Bombay or Chennai or wherever the hell it is – what makes *you* the women's movement? And why do I have to explain my relationship to you! Because you know, they would keep referring us to us in the Mahila Samakhya formal structure as part of the patriarchal Indian state. And I remember Sharda Jain got so fed up of hearing this that she said, 'Well, at least it's *our* patriarchal Indian state, it's not the British patriarchal state, so we are a little ahead. It's alright!' So, you know, I think these were some of the moments that personally gave me a sense of clarity and I am trying to give a glimpse of my own personal journey from wanting to belong to something – to feeling I *am* at the center of something which is as legitimately part of the movement.

L But before that – just re-wind a bit you talked about SPARC. With you and Sheela [Patel] were at the helm, it cannot but have been imagined to be a feminist

organization. But during those days I think there was a lot of hesitation to label certain groups as feminist if they were not following what you described as a typical feminist programme. So at that time was SPARC considered a feminist organization or an organization in which the leading people were feminists? Or did you not identify yourselves in that manner? At that time?

S I think that's very perceptive Laxmi. See, I think between the two of us I think my feminist credentials have always been fairly widely accepted – even if there was question about the line I was taking at some point – but that I am a feminist is something people have always I think accepted, but it was partly because I strongly self-identified that way from the very beginning. For me there was no question of being anything else. Whether my brand of feminism was accepted or not but I was there. I wasn't not willing to be ignored or excluded. Sheela not so. Sheela has never been a person who needed membership of anything and her attitude was I don't have time for these women and all their ideological high jinx. To hell with them.

L just like her (laughs)

S She would have said the same if it was some Marxist group or...Her thing was I don't have time. She never had a need to belong or to be identified. This is what I do. This is what I believe. This is what I am. Does it fit in that box this box or the other box, it's not my problem. In that sense I think there has always been a lot of healthy respect for the organizing capacity and the organizing that was done for a very long time. I think in the latter period – last five-ten years a very different perception because they have gone into big scale construction and that sort of thing. Even to the extent of: is it an NGO or is it like a development organization or whatever. So, ya I think there was always this difference in the way the two of us were perceived. The other thing is I left Bombay, right, in 1988. I came to Bangalore and I set up Mahila Samakhya. That was the thing I did almost for almost the next five years. So, in that sense I went back very much into the mainstream of feminist organizing and debates and so on because of Mahila Samakhya. Because Mahila Samakhya was a women's empowerment program and Mahila Samakhya mobilized because of the way it was set up, a large number of younger and older feminists. For instance people like Abha [Bhaiya] who were a real strong part of the autonomous women's movement, they became key trainers and facilitators for the program in U.P. Similarly, some of the youngsters who did the real, primary organizing in Gujarat were very much from another generation of feminists. I was there in Karnataka. So I think that brought me back into that world which in the latter part of the years in SPARC I didn't choose to occupy that world because I was busy with grassroots organizing. So I came back into that world. Whereas Sheela has never done that.

L Do you think now there's...if one were to fast forward and magically replay that, would there be more openness now?

S I don't just think so– I know so. Because many people who were sort of stalwarts in the autonomous women's groups and in the more let's say 'pure' feminist kinds of spaces – have each in their own way reached out to each other, built new bridges. I am just thinking of the kind of work even that Akshara has done, the two Nanditas [sorry]. I remember having a really good thing with both the Nanditas, Sheila and myself, a couple of other people in the sort of late nineties in the Askhara

office in Dadar. And having a really long conversation about women and work for instance. I mean informal work - the majority of pavement dwellers are informal sector workers also but a lot of data which SPARC has generated about livelihoods and all that – which is very central to the whole resettlement strategy and part of it. It was very interesting to them. So I think there's been lot of respect for each other's work, you know, over the years. Similarly I meet Kamala and Abha and lot of the women from Hyderabad from Anveshi etc who were part of the Stree Shakti group and I meet people like Donna Fernandes and Madhu Bhushan and others from Vimochana and Celine, and I think there is a lot of respect for each other's work now. I would have been I am sure much more critical of what Vimochana used to do than I am today. I mean I think, let me speak of even my own journey to understand how each of us were picking up a piece of this enormous challenge and we were tackling it. Nobody's work is less worthwhile or less worthy than the others. I think we did not understand it in this larger canvas way in those days. Because somewhere we are caught up with the immaturity of feeling that there is one centre or central or key strategy that is most important and the most valuable and others are all sort of playing around. And it's not true. All these strategies are absolutely critical. The enormous enormous wisdom and experience that Vimochana has built in providing women with legal support and legal assistance to fight their cases. Where would we be without that knowledge today, you know what I mean. Even if you look at the debates that took place, though I wasn't here for a lot of the time – I followed it from a distance – on the sexual harassment law. It was informed by so much insight into how law works and doesn't work – where it comes back and bites you and where it helps you. The quality of debate was vastly different from say even when we were mobilizing for the first ban on sex determination. The first law came in Maharashtra and I was part of that mobilization too. And I don't think we had that kind of insight at that time. There has been a lot of growing, and recognition and respect for what others have done.

L Going back to the early days, you know, this slogan of 'personal is political', a lot of people felt it was a Western import from consciousness raising groups, talking about personal lives. Do you have a sense of that happening – the personal discussions about the personal, family relationships?

S See, my experience is that it was happening, but it was happening in somewhat uneven unequal way . So going back to Flavia and Rinki kind of experiences or context. I think what happened was that on a given issue – one or two women became the 'cases' – their cases became the nucleus of the discussion and I think one of the probably – if I was to be honest - I mentioned earlier my own discomfort in those spaces – as feeling rejected or diminished in some way because I was the epitome of the happily married heterosexual woman and that was somehow a no-no, I think part of it was, if I were to be honest, my unwillingness to really put my own relationships under the microscope in those discussions. I wouldn't have liked having to examine my marriage, for instance. Or what were the compromises I was making. So what I recall is that whatever was the cause célèbre became the focus of the debate. It wasn't that each of us was discussing our own personal in that debate. I think someone else's 'personal' allowed us to keep out our 'personal' out of it. But what I do remember Laxmi is side conversations. So I remember for instance when I was on a holiday in Bangalore and I had gone to Streelekha. At that time Sandhya [Rao] was working in Streelekha. Sandhya and I were classmates in college. Very spontaneously she and I had this conversation about how we feel very

marginalized in these groups because we are in these marriages which seem ok and we are reasonably happy and so on. So I think there were a lot of these side conversations about it but we weren't really doing it uh may be in the way that the consciousness raising groups did it. What I do remember though that we never had conversations for example about money and our relationship with money. I remember that the very first time I was challenged to examine my personal relationship with money, and look at the history of my relationship with money and my feelings about money and where it came, from was in 2006 was in a meeting that AWID organized which was the first meeting they did after the first survey they did called "Where is the money for Women's Rights". They did this meeting in Mexico to share the results of that research and for women from different regions to look at the financing of women's rights work in their region. And Joanne in her brilliant way – on the very first day – made us start with the very personal. And it was the first time we became aware of the existence of money and the fact that money gives you certain kind of power. When did we first realize it? How do we feel about money? How do we feel about earning money? It was all very personal stuff. I realized that I had this really really screwed up relationship with money – thanks to this very typical middle class upbringing – money is bad, wanting money is bad. I was sitting in a group where there were these three young women from West Africa, who were real working class women. They had put themselves through school and college by doing petty vending – selling T-shirts, selling little knick-knacks because their families had no money for their fees. And they kept sitting there and saying "I love money", "I love making money" and the rest of us you know squirming because we could never bring ourselves to say it. And she said "I want to be rich. I don't like being poor. I have been poor all my life and I don't like it". So you know I think there was a way in which being Indian middle class feminists – you carried a particular kind of baggage which made discussion of the personal very difficult. So you always had to talk about poor women's 'personal' – that was ok. And they were in that sense – they had very little control. So I remember in our weekly meetings the kind of things women would say to each other. One incident I have to share. I'd really like this to be in the oral history. There was this was a woman called Khadeja – she had been facing not so much domestic/physical violence but I think a lot of psychological abuse. And the way the husband had manipulated her was by not getting his TB treated. This is how he manipulated her. He was diagnosed with TB and we were well into the era of Rifampicin, where in three months time he would have been clear. He would take it for two weeks and he would leave for the village, saying, oh this drug is making me sick, I'll get better in the village. Then he would come back and reinfect everybody in the house and they would be back to scratch. Anyway one fine day he died. And she came to the weekly meeting the week after he died. And everyone was saying, look at her, she's so shameless, what kind of person is she, her husband is barely under the ground and she has come for this meeting and khus pus khus pus. She heard all this. Suddenly just stopped the meeting. She said "*mujhe kuch bolna hai*". She said "you are all bloody hypocrites. You are all talking nonsense. Why do you want me to sit at home and mourn. She said in this marriage "*mujhe sirf do cheez mila – mar khana aur lund khana. Na kabhi mujhe ek din kee khushi mili ya pyaar mila ya dus paisa mila is admi se – uske liye main baith ke roun? Main ab azad ho gayi hoon aur such kahoon toh aap log bhi azad ho jayenge jab tere mard log mar jayenge.*" [I got only two things from marriage: beatings and rape. Not a day or love and not a penny. Why should I cry for such a man? I am free now, and truth to tell, you will all be free if your husbands die!] . Phat, she said it, just like that, in their face. She really called them "What is all this nonsense? What do I care about this *rivaz*/custom which was

all constructed by men. I am a free woman for the first time since I got married and am very happy. And I am not going to pretend otherwise. So you know then there was this whole discussion and – yes *yeh sach hai* and half the group started crying and they said ‘You are so right’. You know, why are we also giving her a hard time. So you know, I really felt that poor women are bringing personal issues to the table without any sense of shame and constraint and they can really talk about it. But somewhere middle class women are very trapped in – however much we may claim a feminist consciousness I think it takes a very very long time for those barriers to crumble and so in autonomous women’s groups, I think a lot of time was spent, this is my impression and maybe I am being unfair in talking about their inter-personal conflicts. I felt bad because you said that to me, or I wasn’t included that decision, stuff like that. It was skirting around the real issues, because they couldn’t talk about the real issues. Or, some people’s real issues came into the group because there was some violence or some kind of crisis and that became the *raison d’être* of the group. So I don’t know whether I have answered your question. It’s very complicated , you know.

L No, you have. A connected question I have is – see there is this very stated and unstated I think goal or objective or maybe even a religion of being collective, consensus driven, of no leaders or hierarchy in autonomous groups. But you in SPARC and Mahila Samakhya were part of hierarchical organizations. So for you was there a contradiction in terms or had you resolved it and decided that this is the way this organization is going to run or did you feel that you were bringing to it a feminist kind of leadership, if that’s not a contradiction in terms, again.

S No, I think definitely we were bringing some experiments – experimental practices of feminist leadership in these hierarchies. But I think right from the outset I was very clear that these structureless groups only end up driving the hierarchies underground. They create invisible hierarchies and invisible power-power structures which are far more dangerous and whatever little experience I had in the autonomous women’s groups only confirmed that. I would see people functioning and the kind of high levels of control they had over the group and over other people but because there was no explicit recognition of that and it couldn’t be named – it was really far more problematic in my view. Now Mahila Samakhya was a very interesting challenge because what I tried to do there was to apply what I had learnt including from the mistakes that we made in SPARC and I tried to kind of apply it in Mahila Samakhya to develop better systems of accountability and more rational feminist hierarchy and rational organizational practices. For example I created a mini – almost created a strike when I introduced a system where permission to take leave had to be taken from those who were affected by your taking leave and not from your superior. So as State Program Director I would have to take permission from the District Level Coordinators to take leave. The District Level Coordinators would have to take permission from the Sahayoginis, and Sahayoginis from the Sanghas. They just didn’t like it. They didn’t want it. And they really protested. And I said you have to give it a go for one year.

L: Who was most upset?

S: The Sahayoginis were most against it. They felt that if we have to go to the Sangha women and ask for permission, then we will have no face (*maryada hogathey – in Kannada*) . I said you are making an assumption – lets see. I don’t think I will lose

face if I have to ask the District Coordinators – that you know I would like to take leave. But I was able to experiment with some of those things even though there were so many aspects of the structure created by the State – the model that was given – But, the second thing for instance is –we never gave the salary at the Sangha level – 400 rupees that was budgeted – 400 rupees a month. We talked to the women and we said – we will treat as a Sangha fund – because I wanted to break that thing that there is this one woman – you know the Sathin model – I wanted to learn from the Sathin experience. I was very very badly criticized for this. Including by people like Abha. That you know, you are taking money away from some woman who needs it. But I felt that the model of paying someone to empower someone – there is something ideologically and structurally flawed in that. It's like making, giving her a stake in perpetually people needing awareness. It didn't make sense to me. And I had seen the problems it had created in Rajasthan because everybody felt, *usko milta hai paisa – usko karne do*. The feeling that it was the Sangha's job – we as a group – we need to work on this issue or whatever. The other thing I was worried about Laxmi was that you make the woman dependent on that – she has never in her life had 400 rupees a month. Not only she the entire household will be dependent on it and five years down the line we will have a strike, make me permanent and all that. So I thought, lets kind of re-think it so we tried to I think apply some of the lessons, insights I had learnt in this. I am most convinced, and in fact I brought all this together in the paper I have done most recently which is this paper 'Leadership for Social Transformation-Clearing the Conceptual Cloud'. And in that the whole conceptual framework I have done takes into account all these experiences, but I start with our experiences in power. So right from Jo Freeman's 'Tyranny of Structurelessness' to our own experiences – the book that the Nanditas did – late eighties – early nineties – 'Issues at Stake' looking at all these different organizational models. I think now probably even the autonomous women's groups have realized that there was a lot of invisible power structures that got created. So I like to think as feminists we have come a long way baby on this and we do realize that it's about accountability and responsibility, about having a lot of transparency and a lot of explicitness.

I think there is still some discomfort with power. I remember a very interesting episode was when I – because it involves Lata [Mani] that's why I am telling you. In Mahila Samakhya – they came-Lata to visit me and another feminist thinker. And and her reaction (I won't name her for various reasons). And Lata said "Its incredible how you have put your power and everyone's power front and center. You know this is really a good thing. You are dealing head on. Look this is the power that I have – officially – formally that the State has given me – Now, how shall we deal with this? How much of this power do you want? In conjunction with that – I am willing to accept this responsibility with this power." You know Lata was really thrilled and excited by the you know the experiments we were doing dealing with this. And the other feminist was like 'Oh my God! Do you have any idea of the power you have?' And I said Yes. She said, 'Doesn't it make you uncomfortable?' and I said 'No! we have to stop being uncomfortable with power and talking about power.' So that episode I think symbolizes a kind of very dualistic reaction to power among feminists. Some have understood that we have to grapple with it and we celebrate that we are trying to do that. Others are still deeply uncomfortable – they would prefer those models where we all pretend we have no power and it's all in the collective, you know.

L So how would you define rationalist – rational feminist hierarchy?

S I think it's one that is driven by three or four core principles and the key principle is I think transparency. That the power -both the visible power and the invisible power hidden and visible, that is, all three faces of power become quite transparent and are named. So for instance in my case – you will have to say my visible power, the power vested in me as a Director, make the budget, to take make these decisions to hire-fire, that is all visible power. And I had a lot of invisible power. And I really had to work to people to understand their own invisible power. Like for example my aunt had been an MP. My family was very influential in Karnataka. My uncle had been a senior IAS officer. So when I walked into an IAS officer's room – I didn't have any – I was not IAS but I had all this family power behind me. It was all invisible but it was the clout of who I was – so my identity and which family gave me a lot of invisible power.

Then I had a lot of hidden power – what are my talents or abilities, my education, the exposure I had had because I had lived in different parts of the world. So things like a knowledge bank which was very formidable because of an accident of history – not because there is something great about me but because of the opportunities I had. So we tried to do stuff like that. This is one – the transparency, recognizing and naming – not just the visible but also the hidden and invisible power which we bring to our roles.

The second core principle is I think is building the hierarchy collectively. How do we build it so that everybody understands where certain kinds of power are vested and what is the responsibility and accountability that goes with it. So the third element I would say is, building it collectively, but also, bringing in accountability and very visible forms of accountability into the understanding of the entire thing. So that it is not just that I have all this power as privilege but that I have power as responsibility also. That I am accountable for what I have done.

The fourth principle, which is very key -unfortunately not just feminist organizations but most social change organizations don't do is to create systems for dealing with conflict. To deal with tension/conflict and in a way that is accessible to everyone and that's fairly open to everyone – I think we're very bad at dealing with tension and conflict. Associated with that is the fifth element is I think of a culture which creates a sense of having rights and responsibilities – building a culture of sort of citizenship in the organizational context. Even if I am in a marginal role – I am an office administrator or I am a cleaner or whatever, how do we build a culture where there is a sense of a voice, some kind of co-ownership of the enterprise.

I think if you create these four or five things you have a rational feminist hierarchy. So it's not the hierarchy that's bad – it's the invisibility that's bad. It's the absence of conflict resolution that is bad, it's the absence of collective responsibility that's bad, the absence of accountability that is bad.

L But how would you respond to the response to Jo Freeman – Cathy Levin's the "Tyranny of tyranny". Where she responds to each question. The main thrust of it was that if we can't even dream of non-hierarchy – what are we doing trying to do build an alternative. It's imperfect, it doesn't dissolve authority structures, but unless you strive for it how do you get there. How would you respond to something like that

where you can say that this is a structure which is run on broadly democratic or feminist principles or that there is this possibility, because also even in Mahila Samakhya wasn't there some attempt at the Sangha level – not to replicate but use feminist organizational principles of collective decision making.

S collective ...

L rotating leadership you know all of that rather than voting I think, wasn't it. How would you reconcile those?

S I would respond to this very simply. I believe that the models – what I am calling the rational feminist hierarchies are in fact part of the transition to the structurelessness. I think the reason – what is holding us back – or that the real challenge of achieving functional, genuine structurelessness is the culture of hierarchy that is deeply internalized within us and the culture of power that is deeply internalized within us. I believe, I mean this is a much longer conversation that I would love to have with you, others who are interested in this, because I actually feel sometimes lonely that we haven't had *this* conversation about what we did we learn. See, when we talked about the culture, Laxmi, that's where I am situating this. And that's what we were trying to do in Mahila Samakhya - what we were trying to do for instance is to create an actual possibility. And to keep pushing. People would say to me – see, you should be like our mother – when we make mistakes you should forgive us. And I would say, I have no wish to be your mother, and they would feel deeply insulted and hurt! Because you know, we love to revert these familial paradigms because that is deeply where we are situated.

L Comforting

S I would understand and empathize with what they were saying but at the same time it was tough love. Because I would have to say to them then it's very convenient because then you can get to be a child, not to take responsibility, and it becomes my problem as the mother if you misbehave. So what we have to do is to create for ourselves, continuously challenge ourselves to create structures where we can grow and where we can shift out of some of those patterns and earlier paradigms and experience some alternate ways of functioning with each other. And as we keep doing that, and as we get each iteration right, or we get it better, or more right than earlier, we'll eventually get to structurelessness. But I am very sure of one thing we can't leap from tyranny to structurelessness.

L: And that's what we tried to do

S: I agree we should have. We did the right thing by trying but what we learnt from the trial is that you can't go from there to here, because if you have grown up in this – you have internalized it – so you are going to reproduce it. Each of us is carrying it within us – there are certain patterns of power we are used to. And we will reproduce them. And if we can't reproduce them overtly, then we'll reproduce it covertly and it will still play a role. So my thing is rational hierarchies are attempts to actually reduce hierarchies and reduce the dependence on hierarchies and certain patterns of power. See, only a few people like me can do that because I am quite comfortable about my power, quite secure about my power and talk about it. And I was also quite

secure to leave the seat. You know I didn't need that job to give me my financial security and so very special circumstances and not what are very common.

I remember this multi-generational feminist dialogue that CREA had organized with Center for Women's Global Leadership and one youth organization I am forgetting – Youth Coalition or something they were called. These three groups they organized this dialogue. And much to my discomfort I was constantly being pushed into the older feminist group for the breakout sessions. But it was interesting for me – some of the women in the group really talked about how assetless they were. You know, how they had spent their entire life in the movement. They had no pension. They didn't own a house. They had no – nothing! They were really assetless. And so they said it's all very well to say why she is clinging to the seat? But where am I to go? You know I have built this organization – I need the financial security also that it provides and Yes, I know I should transition out but I haven't got a plan. I am not saying that's the answer. We can't justify our occupying these positions for ever through that. I am just saying it was an important insight that many people cling to positions because of certain kinds of security that it gives us.

L See I was trying to – issues linked to what we were discussing about hierarchies and how does one tackle them to be – I mean for the sake of the organization – not for the sake of some abstract notion of feminism and linked to it is this idea that a lot of feminist organizations are seen as one woman shows and when there is any critique – the response comes back – Oh but the younger generation is not interested in taking over. They would at the most implement plans, and there are either not interested or not capable and this is something which one keeps on hearing. And during this oral history process, it seems like a lot of the women active in the 1970s and '80s are still heading organizations till date which makes one think – what's happened in the intervening twenty years that capable women are not being produced - which is not correct. So is it that they are not being attracted to feminist groups or is that they are not getting a chance to lead. I mean why is it that the second rung is pretty weak most of the time and the third rung often does not exist. So if you actually talk of removing that head or transitioning, many times the organization just collapsed. So do you see that as a product of the moment, of the movement, which could not be replicated institutionally?

S Ya, I mean I think that's the diagnosis. Ok, for me its very hard to sympathize with this position. Even more so now than in the past because one of the few things that I do ...(doorbell rings)

S: I spend a lot of my time currently in training workshops and institutes for young feminist leaders. With CREA for instance I do two institutes a year. This is not their sexuality course, this is their young feminist leadership courses that they run. One for India and one for Africa. Soon they'll be starting one for the region. I am just blown away by the young women who come to these institutes. So it's not that they are not out there. They are out there. And they are fantastic. Some of them are extraordinarily political, they're committed, they're coming out of different kinds of movements and organisations. Some of them are stuck in really terrible kind of development NGO contexts and have still kept their feminist fervor alive. SO they are pretty amazing. I've also seen organizations at very close hand that demonstrate that if there is real space and the real belief in building strong layers of leadership,

somehow or the other you attract those women and they'll come. One is CREA itself. Where I have seen not just second line but third line and lots of layers of leadership. Vinita Sahasranamam and Sunita Kujir who are two young women who work with me on these institutes – the designing and teaching etc. I mean, they run the show. Geeta...Geetanjali Mishra is not running the show. They are my bosses. They do my contracts, they tell me what they want me to teach. It's really, they are in charge. They are 32 and 33 respectively. And when I see them I see me, I see who I was when I was in FRCH and Dr Antia didn't have the time of day to run anything and he just gave us the space and we ran it. And I really respect what they are doing. And I see it in AWID itself. I mean, in AWID, my boss, Cindy Clark, she's my manager, she's who I report to. She's my daughter's age, ok. She's 34. Lydia Alpizar who is the director of AWID is 39. AWID's membership has transitioned from being this stodgy academic, mainly Northern, Canadian and US kind of membership of say 40+, the median age of the member now is 36 and it's going downwards. So we have about 30 percent members in AWID who are below 30. So they are really young women. So I think I've seen too many - couple of the boards that I sit on Just Associates, Gender at Work, IT for Change, these are very young vibrant organizations, led by relatively young people. I think the problem is it's a chicken and egg situation. If you set yourself up as in if your image in the world is this organization led by this woman who is never going to let go, she's never going to let anyone else really run the show. Even if she formally steps down she'll be pulling strings. Nobody'll come! So it's like – what is the problem – I don't know what to say. Is it the chicken or the egg? Nobody is coming because there's a perception she won't let go. She can't let go because nobody is coming. So it's like a self-fulfilling prophecy. And I can think of some individuals who are coming to mind right now who fit the description of this syndrome. So that's the problem. And it's a really serious problem in India, in the older sort of feminist organizations. But if you see the spate of newer organizations that have emerged, like if you see the LGBT groups, disability groups, the sex workers, if you look at the movement-building and the organizing around striking down Section 377, that was a very young movement, you know. So I think it kind of demonstrates that there are young people out there, especially young women, and strongly feminist in their perspective. So I think a lot of the older organizations...see I can't even bear to hear these excuses any more. I've reached a point where...

L: Maybe one of these sessions in these institutes should be on how to let go. One session on how to grab power and one on how to let go!

S: And actually some of the organizations and institutions and movements that these young women have gone on to build umm because I do a half day session with them on the feminist leadership concept framework and we do in-depth work on power. We spend almost a day on power. Much before I talk about feminism, movement, patriarchy, I just do on power. And looking, personal examination of your own relationship with power, I've now, last one year I have been experimenting with this exercise on 'my personal histories with power'. All the different ways in which my relationship to power has been shaped. Power in the personal sphere, power in the public sphere. Because I really felt that after doing the exercise that Joanna made us do, that nobody ever makes us look at this, you know. And if don't understand how our relationship to power is shaped in a very particular way, we tend to keep missing the boat and missing the point of why we are reacting to things in a certain way. How do I become comfortable with power, how do I become less insecure and worried about losing it? We have discussions.

L: There has always been a contradiction, because you're talking about empowerment and empowering women, and at the same time cutting at its base, saying it's not good, it's not ok. Even re-defining power, or looking at what power really means or could mean in people's lives or in communities or societies. I think that sort of thing is not really happening. One is very uncomfortable as you said, looking at power, so then you're not going to examine how it can be used creatively.

S: There's actually the work of one guy that's influenced me a lot recently and I'm really trying to use it much more strategically in institutes and workshops. That's a guy called Stephen Weiman who's a psychotherapist who's worked with people who have been through severe trauma, like genocide. He's worked with people who've been in the Rwandan genocide, Cambodian genocide, Jewish genocide like Holocaust.

L: With victims, or with perpetrators?

S: With victims

S: And then people who have been severely physically abused or psychologically abused, battered wives, people who were in concentration camps in the Second World War, people who have been in all kinds of....Palestine, things like that. So he has articulated this very interesting concept which he calls power-under. A feminist friend of mine, South African, who I work quite a lot with in the training and facilitation stuff. She sent this to me, and it was very mind-blowing. Because I felt that for the first time, as feminists, we had got access to a concept that unlocked a lot of mysteries for me. Because as women, so much of our experience is of being dabaoed (suppressed), of victimhood etc. There's a particular way in which we learnt to use power. And he talks about victim power. And that is the power of sabotage and...you know, suddenly, Laxmi, it's like this light that explains so much. About why we have so much pathology in feminist organizations for instance, particular ways we treat each other, the way we behave, the way we try to subvert, we cannot confront straight, we spread rumour, we pull down people's character...you know. This is all power-under. So his hypothesis is basically, there is no one who is powerless. It's just that you have access to different means and different forms of power. And if you're a victim, then you learn to use victim power, which is power-under. And that's a very destructive kind of power. And you know, when I teach this stuff, these kids they're just like, oh my god, this so explains so much to us, because they've all experienced it. Somebody will stay, oh I had an aunt, oh my mother's always done this all her life. And in my organization I know so many people who do this. They won't say anything in the meeting, the minute you're out of the meeting, they'll start and they'll be doing chugli chugli like this. Anyway...I'll stop there.

L: Anything mind-blowing you'll like to add?

S: Well as I said, this power-under concept has been really mind-blowing for me and when I read it I just felt I wish I had had access to this idea 20 years ago, it could have helped me understand so much of what was happening and maybe then to deal with it better, including within myself. Ya, I think in conclusion I just want to say that you know, I feel very privileged to have been part of this movement and this journey in that particular era. But my greatest pride and joy as a feminist today is that, and

maybe this is the mind blowing thing I want to end with. Is that the personal experiment I am doing now, right now, is very exciting. As a veteran, well-known, well-established veteran feminist, I'm trying to model for others how we can work under young leadership. How not to always need to be in charge, not to be the top dog. And having put myself in this position where I'm in a hierarchical sense in a subordinate role, I've discovered how immensely empowering it is. Because I don't have to run anything, I don't have to raise the money, I don't have to worry or answering to a board or you know government or donors or whatever. And at the same time receive tremendous respect and tremendous love from the young colleagues I work with. They like work with me, and they use me, very strategically. When they want to present a formidable face to the donors, they say, you know, we have Srilatha Batliwala with us as a scholar, or associate or whatever. So it's great, it's great fun. I really like the place I'm in. I always say that I'm a grandmother in my personal life and I'm a grandmother in the movement as well. It's very un-PC [politically correct] to use that imagery, it's a very heteronormative image, I agree. But in a sense, it's also a metaphor for where I place myself now. So I feel a lot of pride.

L: Thanks so much.

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