Feminist Fables

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crea

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FOREWORD

CREA's founding, in 2000, was an act of imagination. It was born of a vision to address gender and sexuality, reproductive health and rights, and women's leadership capacities, quickly growing to address gender-based violence and disability justice too. Our vantage was rights-based, intersectional and Global South, which marked us as doing things 'differently'. A young organization, we danced on the edge, took some risks, and decided that we were in the business of changing how people thought, which could change the way they act.

But none of this work may have had the impact it did if we hadn't recognized and consistently deployed the power of narrative. It is not happenstance that CREA is well-known for its beautifully designed and carefully produced knowledge resources, ranging from concept papers that explore ideas and intersections, to toolkits and frameworks to strengthen feminist leadership, to articles, case-studies, podcasts and videos.

Compelling storytelling has thus been a faithful fellow traveller in the journey of CREA's work — storytelling as a way of awakening our imaginations, disturbing our internalized biases, and creating new ground for solidarity. And I cannot overstate Srilatha Batliwala's contribution here, as author of several of the best-known and -loved of CREA's publications: most notably, the primers *All About Power*, *All About Movements* and, recently, *Feminist Allyship*. Hers is a rare talent: an ability to infuse everyday stories or anecdotes with a thoroughly thought-through politics.

This attractive volume marks the next chapter of her authorship, capturing voices and insights of women at the grassroots. Srilatha describes them as reflecting her personal evolution, but they also represent storytelling as a form of pedagogy as well as constituting a feminist archive of change. Each of these 'Fables', she says, has taught her something valuable that has held her in good stead through her career.

We are happy to have provided Srilatha the support to bring the *Feminist Fables* into the world, and hope you enjoy them as much as we have enjoyed bringing them to you.

Geetanjali Misra
Executive Director, CREA
December 2025

Each one of these episodes and experiences has remained deeply etched in my consciousness, and created a deep shift in my thinking

Where the fables come from

These stories have been a labor of love and have emerged from the profound moments of learning and insight that I directly experienced while working with the most economically and socially marginalized, stigmatised and excluded women in urban and rural India. Almost all of them are the result of my own learning encounters with women at the grassroots over nearly three decades, from the early 1970s to the early 2000s. A couple of the stories arose from incidents related to me by fellow feminists and activists.

The earliest episode was in Bombay (now Mumbai) city, with a large number set in the 1980s when, through the NGO SPARC, we built a movement of women living in the pavement slums of Bombay. Several occurred during a similar movement-building process with the poorest rural women – mostly Dalit and indigenous – during my tenure launching and directing the government of India's Mahila Samakhya program for women's empowerment in the state of Karnataka. A couple of the stories are based on my experiences outside India, during the Beijing Conference in 1995 and my research on transnational social movements while at the Hauser Center for Nonprofit Organizations at the Kennedy School of Government in Harvard University in the early 2000s.

Each one of these episodes and experiences has remained deeply etched in my consciousness, and each, in its own particular way, created a deep shift in my thinking, or disturbed long-held beliefs, or compelled me to rethink strategies that I hadn't questioned. Several challenged my own internalized privilege and complacency — about sex work, disability, nationalism, about what are "women's issues", and even about justice. Every single one has shaped my understanding of gender justice and social justice in an indelible way, something no amount of scholarly reading or academic theories ever could. Above all, they each ignited within me a sense of wonder and humility — at the wisdom, compassion, humanity, courage, relentlessness, and generosity of women who may have been poor in material terms but who possessed an inherent greatness of spirit.

Which is why I decided to call them Fables, rather than just stories — because each of them is not only timeless but contains at least one idea, lesson or insight that

questions the assumptions and approaches that most of us engaged in feminist and social justice activism have adopted. And I call them Feminist Fables because each story either interrogates or deepens and nuances feminist concepts, or makes us rethink our practice of feminist activism.

Why I decided to record the stories

The decision to record these stories and transform them, if I possibly could, into "fables", came out of another profound experience. When I transitioned out of grassroots work after nearly twenty-five years, I explored different locations and roles from which I could continue to advance feminist social justice. This process soon brought me to training young feminist activists around the world, thanks to CREA. In 2008, I helped redesign and then anchored CREA's Feminist Leadership, Movement Building and Rights Institutes (FLMBaRI) that focus on young feminist activists from across South Asia, East Africa, and the Middle East and North Africa.

The CREA Institutes have a unique pedagogy. Traditional training programs for activists focus on imparting utilitarian skills, the "how to" of social change. This approach does not address the "why" question or provide conceptual and analytical tools to unpack the root causes of poverty, social injustice and exclusion. There is an underlying assumption here that activists are incapable of grasping theory or analysis, and that theory and analytical tools are irrelevant for practice. We at CREA believe the opposite is true — that conceptual clarity and analytical capacity are critical for activists, because they challenge and shift the way people think, and this, in turn, changes how they act – the very nature of their activism is transformed.

One of the challenges of the CREA Institute methodology, as I discovered when I began teaching at the institutes, was how to translate complex theories and concepts — such as social power — in ways that were not abstract and hazy, but accessible to activists, and particularly those with little academic training. And how to do this without "dumbing down" the concepts, or blurring the nuances? I had considerable experience in translating concepts into more tangible and concrete forms for women at the grassroots — this is a critical part of the popular education methodology, in fact. But what was the appropriate way to do this for activists? I therefore began to use the stories to illustrate a complex idea in action, and over time, I saw they played a powerful role and had actually morphed into Fables.

Take, for example, challenging the idea of sex work as the most degrading form of labor, or even the complexity of choice as a concept. Relating the story of Lakshmi ("Lying Down and Getting Up") did the job in a way that no amount of debate and discussion could. Lakshmi's challenge of the sacredness ascribed to some parts of the female body, and the approval given to earning a livelihood using other parts, neatly explained the intersection of patriarchy, caste, and gender. Similarly, "Touch Her Feet" or "Every Third Seed" made the concept of subverting patriarchal and caste power dynamics immediately understandable. Stories like "Why Should I Mourn" and "Whose Yoghurt Is It" conveyed the concept of poor women's resistance to patriarchal norms clearly and vividly.

I began to see the power of the stories not only through the ways in which they helped CREA Institute participants gain command of feminist theories, but how the central concepts in the stories were clearly reflected when they developed action plans for their work, or for how they were going to alter their strategies when they returned to their organizations. Even more gratifying were the emails and messages I received from alumni, sometimes even six and seven years later, citing how a particular story had fundamentally changed the way they approached certain issues in their work — they would speak of Lakshmi, Jijabai, the women of Tegampura, of "Walk Beside Us" as their motto, of "Apologize" as their touchstone for feminist solidarity.

This was not the only effect the stories had. Many of them became metaphors for the power of the feminist popular education and movement-building approaches, and I saw how they inspired our Institute participants to rethink the way they approached their work. They began to see that their programs did not necessarily address the roots of the power structures that trapped the women they worked with, nor build the women's awareness of how the structures sustained and reproduced themselves, in contrast to the events in the stories, emerging from precisely this kind of shift in awareness. To create this kind of questioning in the minds of activists is vital in an era of NGO-ization and the reduction of social transformation into time-bound, short-term "projects". Movement-building has become almost extinct as a strategy, largely because of funding policies that want quick, measurable "results", and which believe that consciousness-raising, popular education and movement-building are too slow and hard to measure in "concrete" terms. Most of the Fables demonstrate the exact opposite — how rapidly and radically change can occur when we mobilize women and help them discover their own power to transform their lives.

The Fables will hopefully re-energize us to unleash women's inherent power to challenge oppression and injustice

It is for all these reasons that I realized I should record the stories, because they were all in my head, and could easily die with me since they had not been documented in any shape or form. I named them "Parables" originally, since each conveyed a lesson or moral of some kind. But this felt too biblical, so I adopted the term "Fables" instead. I began to wonder about the impact they could possibly have on other activists — not just those who heard them from me at CREA Institutes – if they were written down as stories. I realized many people doing capacity-building and training programs for change-makers could use the stories in different ways. So as an experiment, I wrote down a few and recorded them as audio stories — they were shared on a podcast and in a couple of training situations, and the feedback was overwhelmingly positive. Several listeners reported they were blown away by the story. I then developed a full list of the Fables that you can now read in this volume.

The stories are organized in four groups, based on their essence, rather than the issues or events that they describe: Challenging Power; Wisdom and Insight; Doing Things Differently; and Love and Solidarity.

My hope, dear readers, is that the Fables will inform and inspire you in different ways. I hope they will rekindle interest in feminist pedagogy, or the feminist popular education approach, and its power to unleash women's inherent power to challenge oppression and injustice. At a time of backlash against gender equality and human rights, I hope they will also encourage a deeper exploration of feminist movement building as a more powerful approach to resistance, holding the line on past gains, and creating lasting change. And finally, I hope these stories will inspire others to record and share their own Feminist Fables, so that together we can create a powerful archive of her stories, and a vibrant resource for realizing our vision of feminist social justice.

CHALLENGING
power

Whose Yoghurt is It?[1]

In an impoverished village in Bikaner district of Rajasthan, in northwest India, lived Champa and her husband Jaggo – a poor landless couple who worked as daily wage laborers in the fields of landowning farmers. Their days were long and the work was hard in the scorching sun, but this was preferable to the months when the fields were dry and there was no work to be had. And so life went on, and soon Champa gave birth to their son, Bhola. One day, when Bhola was barely two years old, Jaggo told Champa that he had decided to leave the village and go to Delhi in search of a better livelihood. He promised her that as soon as he started earning well in the city, he would send her money every month. Two weeks later, Jaggo left, taking a small bundle of clothes and the few rupees they had saved.

Twelve years passed. In all those years, Champa neither heard from Jaggo nor received any money from him. He never returned to the village, and no one knew where he was. Initially, Champa asked the village elders to help find her husband, but they only shook their heads and told her they had no knowledge of his whereabouts. There was nothing they could do. She must be patient, they said — he would contact her sooner or later. After a year had passed with no news from Jaggo, Champa came to accept that he had abandoned her and probably taken up with another woman in the city. She continued her wage work in the fields and managed to earn enough to feed her son and herself, send him to school, and keep a roof over their heads.

One fine day, Jaggo reappeared in the village, swaggering about like a man of success in fine city clothes. He arrived at the house with his bags, settled in as a matter of right, and acted as though he had been away just a few months, rather than years. He expected Champa to provide his meals and wait on him as she had before he left. He wouldn't answer her questions about where he had been, what he had been doing, why he hadn't returned or sent any money. He either ignored her questions or replied brusquely: "I could not." Meanwhile, he fawned over Bhola, giving him smart clothes and gifts from the city. Champa received only one *dupatta*[2] and a dozen glittery bangles. Every evening, Jaggo would tell Bhola amazing stories about the city — its ancient monuments, thousands of cars, the rich and powerful people who lived there, the amazing food from all over the world. Bhola was enchanted with his long-lost father and followed him about the village like a faithful puppy.

[1] Based on an incident related to me by the late Srilata Swaminathan

[2] A long scarf

Two weeks passed and Champa became increasingly tense and worried about Jaggo's intentions. Did he plan to stay in the village? If so, why wasn't he looking for work? Was he planning to return to Delhi? Jaggo brushed her questions aside. She asked many neighboring women if they had heard anything about Jaggo's plans from their husbands, but they knew nothing.

A day or two later, as he ate his evening meal, Jaggo announced casually: "I am leaving for Delhi in a few days, and I will be taking Bhola with me." Bhola beamed with joy, but Champa was stunned. She leapt to her feet and shouted: "No way! Bhola stays here and finishes school. And helps me with my work. After that, we will see about Delhi!"

Jaggo flung his plate aside and shouted, "Impertinent woman! He is my son, and I will take him where I wish!"

"Your son?" cried Champa hotly, "*Your* son, you say? Where were you these last twelve years when I was struggling to raise this child alone? Did you send a penny for his food, clothes, or schooling? Did you spend a single day nursing him when he was ill? Borrowing money from moneylenders to take him to a good doctor in the town? Starving yourself to buy him expensive medicines and tonics? You are no more his father than the man next door!"

Jaggo smacked Champa across her face. "How dare you speak to me that way! I am your husband, and you will respect me!" *SMACK*. "He is my son, and he belongs with his father! This is no age for a boy to be with a woman, pampered and coddled. He will come with me to Delhi, and I will put him to work and make him a man!"

At that moment, Jaggo's plan became blindingly clear to Champa: the reason for his visit, for all the gifts for Bhola. He had obviously come back for the sole purpose of taking Bhola back with him, now that he was old enough to work. He would take everything the child earned and enrich himself. There was no love, no fatherly feeling, no concern for Bhola's future. It was the plan of a selfish, cunning man whose only concern was for himself, his status, his own comfort.

Emboldened by this realization, Champa threw her challenge at Jaggo: "Really? You will make him a man? We will see about that. I will go to the Panchayat[3] and seek

[3] The village council, which traditionally had five (panch) members and the power of arbitrating local disputes

justice! The Panchayat will decide who this boy belongs to — his mother or his father!"

The very next morning, Champa ran to the local village council office and insisted on speaking to the Sarpanch, the head of the council. She laid out her case. He told her it was a matter for the full council to decide, and that a special meeting would be called in a week's time to arbitrate the dispute.

Jaggo busied himself in the following days. He went to the homes of all the Panchayat members, and members of his extended family, and made his case repeatedly: "After childhood, a boy belongs with his father!" Jaggo declaimed. The turbaned heads of his listeners nodded wisely in agreement. "In the city, Bhola can learn a trade, earn good money, and become a strong man. What future does he have, in this poor village? I only want what is best for my son! You must speak for me at the council hearing."

He never explained why he had not sent money for Bhola's care all these years, nor did any of the men think to ask. Jaggo preempted such doubts by saying, "I could not come back or send money because I was working so hard! Life in the city is expensive — I was saving every penny so that one day, I could take my son to the city and give him a better life!" He even sweet-talked some neighboring women, convincing them that he had only Bhola's welfare at heart.

Poor Champa was so busy with her housework and farm labor — Jaggo still hadn't given her a single rupee — that she had no time to speak to anyone or advocate her case. She had no idea that Jaggo had been busy undermining her, while she worked to put food on their plates.

The day of the arbitration dawned, still and hot. The Panchayat meeting was to be held in the evening, when the sun was setting and people were free to attend. Champa rushed home from the fields, quickly washed her hands and feet, and ran to the meeting. She was shocked to see over a hundred people — mostly men — assembled there, seated on the ground outside the Panchayat office, or in the shade of the large Peepul tree across the road. Champa stood to one side, nervously tying and untying the ends of her dupatta.

The Panchayat members sat on plastic chairs in a semicircle, with Jaggo seated on the ground beside them and Bhola at his side. They beckoned to Champa to sit on the

other side. Bhola looked frightened, his eyes cast down. Jaggo gave her a contemptuous look, then ignored her.

The Sarpanch began the proceedings and gave the gist of the case to the assembled crowd. "Our decision today," he said in a loud, authoritative voice, "is whether this boy, Bholaram, belongs with his father, Jagraj, and should be allowed to go to the city with him, or whether the boy belongs with his mother, Champa Devi. I now call upon Jaggo to plead his case. Thereafter, five others may speak in support of his claim."

Jaggo stepped forward and spoke with passion and confidence. Heads nodded in affirmation; a few applauded when he finished. Five other men then stepped forward and spoke eloquently, one after the other, defending Jaggo's rights over Bhola. At the core of each speech was the same message: a father's rights over his children — especially his sons — are absolute and must be upheld. A mother is at best the nurturer and caregiver in childhood, and later, a dependent. While Champa's care was acknowledged, it was seen as a mother's natural duty, nothing special. What Jaggo wanted was his right and responsibility: to secure a good future for his son.

Champa sat listening, head bowed, dupatta covering much of her face. A storm of emotions raged within her — fear, anger, desperation, outrage at the injustice, and a growing realization that when her turn came, no one would speak for her or support her claim. She would have to speak for herself — but what could she say? Wouldn't these men always defend the rights of another man? Would anyone listen to an illiterate low-caste woman?

Tears streamed down her face. She prayed silently to the Goddess Shakti. "Please guide me, Sati Devi," Champa pleaded. "Please help me find the words to stop these people from taking my beloved child!" Suddenly, she heard her name. The Sarpanch said, "Champa Devi! It is your turn to speak. Who else will speak for Champa Devi?" Not a single person stepped forward — not even one of the few women sitting at the far back. They sat mute, their heads covered, faces veiled. She could feel their empathy and understood their fear and silence.

Champa stood up shakily, but as she did, a strange, unexpected courage flowed into her. She suddenly felt strong. She knew what to say. She stepped forward and faced the Panchayat members and the assembly, and spoke in a calm, clear voice:

"I am a poor, illiterate woman. I cannot speak the big words of my husband and the brothers who spoke for him. There is no one here to speak for me. So instead of a speech, I will give you a riddle. It has only two answers — you must choose one. Whatever you choose is also the final judgement in this matter. I will accept it without question."

"Here is the riddle: I own a cow. Every day, I feed it, treat its ailments, clean it, and care for it in every way. The cow gives me a lot of rich, thick milk. I keep some for my family and sell the rest. One day, the cow gave more milk than usual, so I decided to make some yoghurt. But I didn't have any starter culture, so I borrowed some from my neighbor. The yoghurt set beautifully. Suddenly, my neighbor comes to my door and says — 'That yoghurt is mine! I gave you the culture, so the yoghurt belongs to me!' I was shocked. The cow is mine, I fed and cared for it, the milk is mine. All the neighbor gave was a bit of starter — how can the yoghurt be hers?"

People began to stir and murmur. A wave of discomfort passed through the crowd. Champa turned to face the Panchayat. "Tell me, respected brothers — who does the yoghurt belong to? Whatever your answer, that will be the judgment in this case. All my husband ever gave was that little bit of starter that created this child. It is I who birthed him, fed him, cared for him all these years — while Jaggo didn't send a penny or set eyes on this boy for over twelve years.

"So tell me, respected Council, whose yoghurt is it? If the yoghurt is mine, then Bhola belongs with me. If the yoghurt is my neighbor's, then let Jaggo take him. Either way, I will abide by your decision."

Champa stood quietly aside, waiting. The Panchayat conferred for less than a minute. The Sarpanch stood up and announced, in a somewhat shaky voice:

"It is the Panchayat's decision that …. the yoghurt belongs to you, Champa Devi. The boy remains with you."

Champa let out a shriek of joy. Bhola hung his head in disappointment — he had no idea of the misery his mother had saved him from. Jaggo stormed out of the meeting, grabbed his things and left the village that night. But the villagers never forgot that day — the day a poor woman taught them an unforgettable lesson about wisdom and inner power. They still tell their children the story of Champa Devi.

Why Beg for Our Wages?

Tegampura is a small village in the underdeveloped district of Bidar, in Karnataka state in southern India. Until 1948, Bidar had been part of the kingdom of the powerful princely state of Hyderabad. Even in the early 1990s, when the events in this story occurred, the social structure of this region remained highly feudal, with a rigid caste hierarchy. A few "upper-caste" families owned most of the land. Working as agricultural laborers in their fields was the only source of livelihood for the landless, most of whom were Dalits.[1]

[1] "Dalit" means the oppressed. The term was coined in the late 1960s by progressive leaders of former "untouchable" castes, because all the names of these stigmatized castes were akin to insults.

There was one unusual and antiquated ritual that had survived in some clusters of villages of Bidar, which symbolized the social oppression and economic dependence of the laboring castes: At the end of the day's work in the fields, the Dalit laborers did not immediately receive the day's wages. Instead, they had to file past the back of the landlord's house and ritually beg for food, their hands raised in supplication. The landlord's wife, seated in the back verandah, would throw them pieces of the previous day's stale bread. The laborers had to catch the bread and bow in ritualized thanks. Only then would they be paid the day's wages. Gender disparity was further embedded in the wage system: only the men were paid cash wages; the women received only a bag of grain, matches to light the firewood, or oil for their lamps.

Even forty-five years after Indian Independence, after the practice of untouchability was abolished and made legally punishable, no one had thought to question this shameful custom. That is until 1991, when activists from a government-initiated women's empowerment program called Mahila Samakhya entered Tegampura and its surrounding villages and began organizing Dalit women. Mahila Samakhya, which literally means "Women Valued as Equals", was a program launched by the Ministry of Education, Government of India, in 1988. The program was designed by feminists and then implemented through specially formed autonomous organizations led and staffed, for the most part, by feminist activists.

The Mahila Samakhya strategy focused on feminist popular education, with a strong emphasis on building collectives of the poorest women at the village level (called "Sanghas" or "Samoohs"). Activists were trained to create safe spaces for marginalized women to discuss their problems, critically analyze them, and begin challenging dominant ideologies and confronting injustices.

Mahila Samakhya activists began working in Tegampura in late 1991, and by early 1992, a small but cohesive collective of about 25 Dalit women had been formed. They began to discuss the custom of ritual begging and poured out long-suppressed feelings of rage and humiliation. At one of their weekly meetings, their outrage culminated in a decision to refuse to perform the begging ritual, which they saw was a way to reinforce their subjugation as Dalits. They would stop begging and demand their wages as a right.

When the women went home and communicated their resolve to the men and elders of their families, the reaction was horror and fear. They pleaded with the women not to go through with their decision. "There will be a caste war!" they protested. "They will burn our huts, rape the women and slaughter us! We are too weak to win against the landlords."

But the women were adamant. "What is the use of being alive if we cannot live with dignity or respect? How can we allow our children and grandchildren to continue to be humiliated like this — and their children after them? If they kill us, all the better! The government will have to take notice and stop it. The begging must end." Other women asserted, "We are weak only if we think we are weak! If we all unite against this practice, we will show our strength — who will harvest the crops if not us? Who will clear the fields?"

The women had decided that they and their men would refuse to work the fields until the landlords agreed to pay their wages without the begging ritual. But they were too strategic to rush into action. Anticipating the landlords' reaction, they spent the next few weeks going to all the surrounding villages and asking their fellow laborers not to step in as substitute workers if the landlords tried to hire them. They also planned their act of rebellion for a time when the crops were ripe for harvesting, when even a few days' delay would mean damage and financial loss.

When all was in place, the women led the way. On the appointed day, after finishing the day's work in the fields, they stood outside the landlords' houses and boldly demanded their wages, shouting: "We will not beg anymore! Pay us our wages for the work we have done!" Incensed at their audacity in refusing to perform the begging ritual, the landlords refused to pay them and threatened dire consequences. They declared a lock-out of sorts, refusing to let the Dalits work in their fields. The women surrounded their men and silently led them home.

As the women had anticipated, the landlords drove to neighboring villages in search of other workers. However, thanks to the women's earlier campaign, mobilizing support from their brethren there, the landlords' strategy failed, and the crops stood wilting in the fields. The Dalit families of Tegampura were supported with meagre supplies from neighboring areas, or they simply gave up eating twice a day, struggling to

survive the boycott. They were hungry but their spirits were high — they knew the landlords were nervous about resorting to violence, aware that the women had the backing of the government-supported Mahila Samakhya program.

Desperate, the landowners employed a local witch doctor to cast a spell on the movement's leaders, exploiting the local belief in "banamati" — the term for being possessed by evil spirits. The belief in the power of possession was so strong in their culture that some women actually surrendered to it, becoming lethargic and morose. But others saw it for the tactic it was and refused to submit. "Possession by evil spirits is nonsense!" they declared, "It works only if you believe it works! Can't you see this is their clever way of trying to break our struggle?"

Some of the movement leaders went further, shrewdly turning the tables on the landlords. They knew that one of the landlords was trying to arrange a bride for one of his sons, and that a marriage broker had been engaged by the potential bride's family to negotiate the match. One day, they waited by the roadside and waylaid the broker on his way to the landlord's house. They warned him that any girl who married into the landlord's family would be subjected to witchcraft! The broker promptly reported this to his clients, who withdrew the marriage offer, much to the landlord's chagrin.

In less than two weeks, as their crops lay withering, the landlords caved in. They asked the Tegampura women and their families to return to the fields and agreed to pay their wages without the begging ritual.

The women had won a great victory. Economically, of course, little had changed. They still earned paltry wages, well below the legal minimum, and depended on the landowners for work. Yet, everything had changed — a deeply embedded power structure had been shaken up by a small band of courageous women. They had sent out a signal to their oppressors, eradicated a centuries-old custom, and changed the power equation between themselves and their men and between the Dalit community and the dominant caste. And all this happened because someone came along and created a space where the women could look at their reality with new eyes. Someone helped them voice and analyze their sense of injustice and believe in their power to create change themselves. This is how the women of Tegampura experienced and demonstrated the meaning of empowerment.

Touch Her Feet

The caste system in India intersects with gender in specific ways. One form in which these oppressions intersect is that upper-caste men assert power over "lower"-caste men by controlling the labor and bodies of "lower"-caste women, including sexual control. In one of the Dalit communities we worked with in Mahila Samakhya Karnataka, a Dalit bride could not spend her wedding night with her husband. Instead, she had to be sent to the upper-caste landlord's house, to be "deflowered" by the landlord or one of his sons. This is just one example, but across the country, sexual violence by men of privileged groups against women from marginalized communities was, and continues to be, a common occurrence. These atrocities are usually hushed up or fatalistically accepted.

And so it was, more than thirty years ago, in Rajasthan, northwest India, a Dalit girl was raped by an upper-caste man. The incident, however, occurred in an area when a strong feminist empowerment program had been active for some years, raising women's consciousness about sexual violence, caste oppression and so on. The poorest and most socially marginalized women had been mobilized into collectives, which met regularly and strategized on how to challenge the injustices in their lives. Consequently, the rape was met by fury, heated discussion, and the kind of outcry that would have been unthinkable a few years earlier.

When the outrage did not subside as it usually did, the wealthy and powerful family of the rapist tried different strategies. First, they threatened the protesting women: their huts would be burnt, their men would be thrashed, they would not be given paid work. When the women remained unmoved, they resorted to bribery: the girl's family would be paid a handsome sum in exchange for keeping quiet and getting the other protesters to do the same. The impoverished family of the survivor, especially the men, were quite willing to accept this offer. But the women's group leaders and the empowerment program activists convinced them to reject all offers of "compromise", since this would only encourage future violations of Dalit women and reinforce the caste power structure.

The Dalit women's collectives and activists debated how, then, to move forward. The women knew the police would be unwilling to accept a case filed by a Dalit girl against a powerful upper-caste man, so they rejected this route. In fact, the entire "formal" or legal system was dismissed, after deliberation, as inaccessible to poor women. The opportunity costs alone were beyond their means: transport, legal expenses, time and wages lost. Most of all, they felt the long-drawn out legal process and the caste, gender and social biases embedded within judicial institutions made getting any meaningful justice unlikely.

The core question that then emerged was this: what would constitute genuine justice for the survivor, while also shaking up the age-old caste power structure that sanctioned such violence against Dalits, especially Dalit women? The women came up with a unique solution that would never have occurred to even the most committed feminist advocate from outside their context: they would demand a public apology by the rapist, in front of the entire village.

This was not easy to achieve. It called for an ongoing agitation to convince the landlord's family that they would not back down from their demand. It required leveraging the empowerment program's support from the state-level government leaders and senior officials to create pressure from above. After several weeks of mobilization at multiple levels, the perpetrator's family caved in and agreed to the apology.

A large village assembly was held, presided over by some of the Dalit women leaders. The young woman was called to the stage. The woman declared that she was a victim of caste violence, and that no shaming or shunning of her or her family by anyone would be tolerated. The rapist was then summoned and

asked to publicly acknowledge his crime. He swaggered to the stage, treating the matter as a joke, and delivered his apology with a sneer.

It was then that the presiding women delivered a surprise blow: "You will now bend down, touch her feet and ask for forgiveness," they said. He was shocked and refused. But the women surrounded him and made it clear that they would not let him go until he complied. Trapped, he bent down, touched the young woman's feet, and mumbled another apology. Utterly humiliated, he then charged out of the assembly as fast as he could.

The women didn't react to this abrupt departure. A man from a dominant caste touching a Dalit girl's feet was a symbolic abasement and humility, which had never been witnessed in this patriarchal, caste-ridden region. They knew this act had sent a strong message about the power of marginalized women, who had decided to resist the forces of oppression and exploitation. From now on, no man from a dominant group would feel a sense of impunity while attacking a Dalit woman. Surprisingly, there were no reprisals against the women or the survivor's family.

We may not agree with how this act of sexual violence was handled. It may seem that people took the law into their own hands. Often, this kind of popular justice results in problematic outcomes, like compelling victims to marry rapists. And yet, the truth is that not only is the formal legal system unaffordable and inaccessible to marginalized women, it is also often deeply biased against them in practice.

Creating a feminist consciousness and undertaking a feminist analysis of the forces at work and potential tactics is the game-changer as this story demonstrates. Supported by their activist sisters, the women developed an intersectional feminist strategy that recognized the interplay of caste and gender power, upheld the survivor's rights, contextualized justice within local realities, and challenged deeply embedded caste power.

Why Should I Mourn?

Among the many strong women leaders who emerged in the early stages of the women pavement dwellers' movement in Bombay, Khodeja was exceptional. Unlike her vociferous sisters, she was quiet and reflective, speaking rarely and only when she had something important to say, or make a point no one else had. This made her a good listener. One could see from her expression that she was not just listening but absorbing and reflecting on the discussion — that she was a deep thinker.

But Khodeja often looked sad and worn-out when she came to the meetings of the women's collective in her neighborhood. Her face and arms were often bruised, which she tried to cover with her sari. Her exhaustion was not just from the overwhelming workload and daily struggles that came with being a poor woman, a mother, and a domestic worker living in a pavement hut with no water pipes or toilets, working from dawn to dusk. It arose from dealing with an alcoholic, periodically violent husband, who earned little and drank most of his wages when he did. She had to support this man and their three children with her meagre earnings.

One day, the women's collective meeting was abuzz. Khodeja's husband had died and been buried the previous day. Stories spread about the cause of his death: He had wandered onto the road in a drunken state and been hit by a passing car. No, he had collapsed in the drinking den he frequented. Or he had been beaten up by some other men for unpaid debts and died as a result. No one seemed to know what had really happened, only that he had died in bad circumstances and had been laid to rest.

The following week, the meeting began with over twenty-five women present, discussing the challenge of obtaining ration cards when they lived in huts on the pavement with no formal address. Khodeja appeared at the door of the meeting room, dressed in white, head covered as always. She sat in a corner, in her usual quiet way. But as the women realized who it was, a silence descended.

Suddenly, a strident voice was heard: "Shameless woman! It is not even ten days since you buried your husband, and you have the gall to show up at this meeting?"

"Have you no decency?" scolded another, "How can you not observe at least a few weeks of mourning before brazenly going about as though nothing has happened?"

For a moment, there was silence. Everyone held their breath, wondering how Khodeja would respond. Would she cry? Would she leave the meeting in humiliation?

Khodeja did nothing of the sort. Instead, she stood up, shaking with rage, and shouted back: "You call me shameless, you wretches! What do you call the man who made my life miserable for twenty long years? Who never gave me a penny to buy food, even for his own children! Who tortured me, never saying a kind word or even buying me a few bangles or a new scarf to cover my head! He was the shameless one, not me! How dare you chastise me!"

The women sat, mouths agape — stunned by the power and truth of Khodeja's words. But she was far from done. An emotional dam had burst within her, and her pain and rage seemed to flood the room.

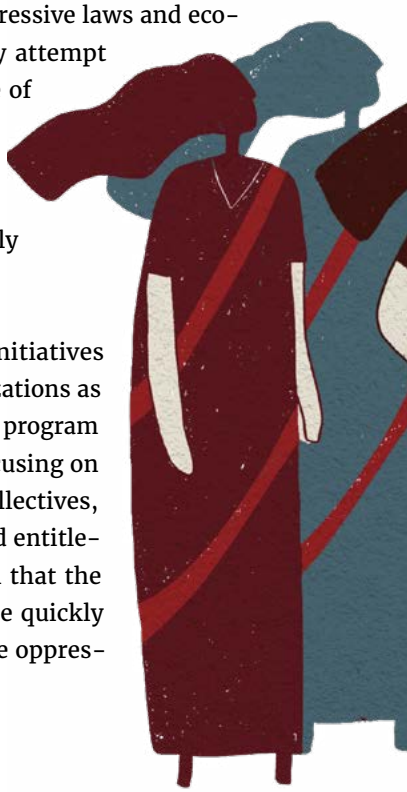
"If you were not such hypocrites, you know that this is true for most of you! Yet you want me to put on a show, act the sorrowing widow! Well, I am wearing the widow's whites. But more than that I will not do. I'm not sorry he is dead — do you hear me? What did he ever give me except beatings and forced sex? I am not sorry he is dead, so why should I cry? I can finally live my life with some dignity and peace. So tell me, you virtuous fools — WHY should I mourn? WHAT should I mourn?"

The women sat with bowed heads, overwhelmed by the grim reality behind this fearless woman's words. They never again dared to question Khodeja's right to go about her daily life. And Khodeja returned to the weekly meetings, remaining the quiet, perceptive, insightful woman she had always been. But there was one big difference. She no longer looked morose or exhausted. She sometimes smiled, or even laughed. It was a wonderful sound.

Wear These Bangles, Do Your Duty

In most parts of South Asia, offering bangles to a man is considered an insult. It amounts to declaring him a wimp, cowardly or unmanly — in other words, a girl or a woman. This is, of course, highly offensive to men. In deeply patriarchal societies, girls and women are considered far inferior to men in status, ability, and physical courage. While attitudes are slowly changing, there is a long way to go, as this story shows.

Bihar, in northern India, is an economically backward state, and the eastern region is not only more impoverished, but also riddled with feudal social norms and economic relations. Until recently, big landowners, called "zamindars", had immense power and had their armed enforcers of their writ. India's progressive laws and economic reforms had little to no impact on these fiefdoms. Any attempt to empower or organize marginalized people, especially those of oppressed castes and those dependent on the landowners for their livelihoods, was met with violence. Activists engaged in even simple interventions like adult literacy or health education with poor women or their communities, were frequently assaulted and even killed, with almost total impunity.



Despite these conditions, several rights and empowerment initiatives were launched in these regions of Bihar, by civil society organizations as well as the state and central government. The Mahila Samakhya program of the government of India was one such, launched in 1989, focusing on awareness building, mobilizing of the poorest women into collectives, adult literacy, and empowering women to claim their rights and entitlements. Mahila Samakhya activists had some protection, given that the program was sponsored by the central government. They were quickly able to mobilize Dalit women, who soon began to challenge the oppression and violence that they faced.

A few years after the program was launched, an all-too-common incident took place in one of the villages. A young Dalit woman was sexually assaulted by an upper-caste man who was a close relative of the local landlord. Armed with their newfound knowledge and self-belief, the women's collective decided to approach the district police station and file a complaint. Their families, especially the men, scolded and pleaded against this bold action, fearing violent reprisal by the landlord's goons. But the determined women proceeded anyway.

On the day they arrived at the town police station, the constable on duty refused to even let them into the building. He stood at the door and demanded to know what their business was. When they told him, he laughed. When they persisted, his amusement turned into rage. He yelled: "You filthy untouchables, you want to file a complaint against the landlord's relative? You bunch of beggar women, who do you think you are? Get out before I thrash you for your audacity!" He marched back in and slammed the door shut.

Furious, but helpless, the women returned to their village, again spending more than they could afford on the bus fare. They met again the next evening and debated what they should do next. And they came up with a simple yet brilliant strategy:

After collecting some more money to travel from the other women's groups and from the survivor's family, they returned to the police station a few days later. The policeman who had chased them away was on duty again, and he emerged, shouting. The women ignored him, pushed him aside and marched into the office of the superintendent, the seniormost police officer at the station. The officer was stunned. Before he could summon other staff to remove the women from his office, their spokeswoman announced: "We have come to give you a present for the wonderful job you and your colleagues are doing."

Saying that she opened the bundle in her hands and spilled a couple of dozen bangles on his desk. Shocked, he stood up and shouted: "How dare you insult me like this? Are you calling me a woman?"

"Yes indeed, dear sir," she replied, "but this is not an insult! Far from it. You see, every day women wear bangles, and do their duty, no matter how difficult, no matter how poor they are, even when they are sick. But none of your men seems to know their duty! We came here to file a simple complaint about the violence done to one of our daughters, and your constable refused to listen to us or write down our complaint, which is his duty. Just as it is our duty as citizens to report a crime. Perhaps if your men wear these bangles, they will learn to do their duty, just as we humble, stupid women do!"

The superintendent was silent for several minutes. Just as the women were losing hope, he suddenly shouted for his junior officers. Several rushed in, including the errant constable at the front desk. He was strongly rebuked in front of the women. Then, demanding that the register be brought to him immediately, the superintendent himself wrote the complaint in detail. He warned the women, in a kind voice, that there may not be much he could do, given the power of the perpetrator's family, but he would do his best.

As expected, nothing much came of the case, but the women did come to hear that the superintendent had spoken to the culprit and warned him against such acts in the future. The women still felt they had achieved a significant victory, for the young woman herself, and for all women of oppressed castes. Through the simple act of breaking the silence, the acceptance and shame that had surrounded such incidents for centuries, they had taken a huge leap.

Every Third Seed

Genetically modified seeds have been aggressively promoted around the world, and India is no exception. Indian farmers, especially the small and marginal ones, have embraced these seed varieties because the higher yields increase their income, particularly for commonly grown crops like rice, wheat and lentils. Over the past decades, however, the shortcomings of the GMO varieties for small farmers have also become visible: they require more water — and therefore sustained irrigation. They are more vulnerable to pests and need more expensive chemical fertilizers and pesticides, which deplete the soil. It's a classic case of short-term gains and longer-term loss, not to mention the planetary damage. A more serious consequence is that the older and hardier natural varieties — what are now called "ancient seeds" because they have been cultivated for centuries, even millennia — have almost vanished. Despite the lower returns, these seeds were reliable, needed only organic fertilizer, were more resistant to pests and climate-resilient, and produced a decent crop even with low rainfall.

Not many of us know that all around the world, from Latin America to Africa to Asia, it is women who have always been the guardians of the seed pool. In most agricultural societies, women are entrusted with saving seeds from each crop to use in the next round of sowing. In many indigenous communities, seeds are not merely a means to an end, but considered a divine gift of Earth, the mother, and revered for their magical potency. Perhaps that is why women from agricultural communities have led the resistance against genetically modified seeds, and struggle to protect and preserve the traditional varieties, giving this tussle a very gendered dimension.

This is the story of one such act of resistance.

These events occurred in southern Karnataka in South India, a region that usually enjoys good rains and has enough water for rain-fed and irrigation-based agriculture. Salesmen from a for-profit agricultural company launched a campaign to convince local small farmers to use the company's genetically modified seeds for their rice and lentil crops. They lured the farmers by assuring them that modified seeds would double their yield and offered the seeds for free. They threw in the additional bait of subsidized fertilizer and pesticides. The farmers targeted were, of course, all men.

These men returned to their villages and shared the news of the free seeds and the promise of a doubled yield. Many women, though, had their doubts.

"How can the crop be doubled? We have been growing these crops for generations — now suddenly we'll get twice as much, by magic? This sounds suspect!"

"And what about next year, when we will have to buy seeds? What will they cost?"

"What if there is a bad monsoon and the crop fails? Many of us don't have access to irrigation. At least the old seeds will produce a small crop that we can sell — what is the guarantee that these new ones won't die without enough rain?"

The men were annoyed at their wives and mothers for this dampening attitude.

"You foolish women, you know nothing about these modern trends! These seeds are being used all over the world and farmers are getting rich. But no, you want us to stay poor forever!"

"Whether you women like it or not, we are going to plant them. Then you will learn not to be so skeptical!"

And so it was that when the first rains arrived, the fields were tilled and the sowing of the rice and lentil crops began. On small farms in this area, the custom was for the man to walk ahead with the handheld tiller, ploughing a furrow, while his wife walked behind him, dropping the seeds into the furrow one at a time, from a pouch tied around her waist. The new seeds were sowed, farm after farm.

There was, however, one rebellious woman named Rukkamma, who practiced a subtle sabotage of her own. She hid a pouch of the old seeds behind the pouch of the genetically modified ones. As her husband walked ahead making the furrow, she dropped two of the new seeds and one of the old ones into the moist soil. She had decided, secretly, to test whether the new seeds were really so amazing. The monsoon, after all, was unpredictable. What if the rains were poor or failed? If every third seed she planted was the sturdy old one, at least she could protect their crop from total failure, and her family from further indebtedness and poverty.

Rukkamma's apprehension proved right. The rains failed that year. The monsoon was scanty and large parts of the country were hit by drought. The modified seed crop failed miserably, despite the farmers' desperate attempts to water their land as best they could. On one field, however, a strange phenomenon was spotted: a small but sturdy crop had grown and was ready for harvest. It was, of course, the field belonging to Rukkamma's family.

Every day, more and more people came from surrounding villages to witness the wonder for themselves. And a clamor grew to know how this had happened — how did the same seeds they had all used produce a crop of any sort in only this one field? Rukkamma's husband was as amazed as the others, but he greatly enjoyed all the attention, and puffed out his chest with pride.

"The gods have blessed us. That is the only explanation! They heard our prayers and rewarded me for my hard work," he crowed.

"But we all worked hard," protested many in the assembled group. "Why should you alone be so fortunate?"

Rukamma stepped forward and spoke out: "Because the gods have blessed this foolish man with a very smart wife! Can you not see that the crop standing before you is born of the old seeds, the ones you foolish men rejected? Every third seed I sowed was the old one, without my husband's knowledge! Your wonderful modern seeds failed because there was little rain, but our old seeds survived! Don't be fooled by those city men, who are only interested in making money. The gods gave us the old seeds, and they will always protect us!"

Rukkamma's husband looked at her with reluctant respect. The others were humbled. They went away with the resolve to keep the old seeds as the major part of the crop, limiting the modified seeds to a small area. This in turn enabled the local NGO promoting sustainable agriculture to advocate for the old seeds, to renew and strengthen organic farming, ensure diversity in cropping patterns, and protect soil fertility. In truth, Rukkamma's act of resistance sowed a much more powerful seed: It led to the formation of small farmers' groups, the majority of whom are women, who now lead a successful movement for organic, sustainable agriculture and protection of the region's biodiversity.

WISDOM AND insight

Lying Down and Getting Up

It was 1972 and I had just started social work school in Bombay. Our curriculum involved four days of classroom instruction and two days of practical training or "field work": one for "case work" with individuals and one working in slums and low-income areas to learn community organizing.

I was all of 20 years old. While my head was full of passionate social justice ideologies, I had little exposure to or understanding of the actual impact of poverty on people's lives. My naivete became evident in the very first semester, when I was assigned to a government "Rescue Home" for underage sex workers. This is where under-18 girls who were "rescued" in raids on Bombay's brothels were brought for counseling and "rehabilitation" or even sent back to their villages and homes. I was assigned to work with three such young women: Lakshmi and Dhanu from Andhra Pradesh and Ripa from West Bengal.

Dhanu and Ripa were easy to talk to. They readily told me their stories, how they were trafficked into sex work, how they hated it, and how much they wanted to go home. One common theme was how poor their families were and how someone in the village or town where they lived had promised them good jobs in the city that would let them send money home and live better lives themselves. They were put on trains, picked up in Bombay and taken straight to the brothel, where they were beaten and starved until they submitted. The brothels were generally run by "madams", retired sex workers who were kind and harsh in turns.

I lapped it all up without questioning. It was only later that I learned that Dhanu was doing her third stint in the Rescue Home and would undoubtedly return to her madam and her brothel as soon as she was released on her 18th birthday. Ripa's story was similar, though it was clear that she was depressed, had never reconciled herself to sex work, and still hoped to find the money to return home.

Lakshmi was very different. She had a freckled, puckish face, disarmingly attractive when she grinned. Seventeen years old at most, she was tough as nails and very self-assured. Even her walk was more of a strut, shoulders back, head up, daring anyone to look down at her. She had no time for do-gooders like me and was quite

hostile in our early encounters. I found her rather intimidating, even though I was a few years older. When I asked her to tell me her story, she would reply tartly:

"Why are you interested? What will you do after hearing my story?"

"I want to help you. Tell me how you got into this situation, and maybe we can find a way out?"

My pious attitude instantly annoyed her. "My situation?" she barked, "The only thing wrong with my situation is being stuck in this place! And how do you think you are going to help me? What do you know about my world?"

This gave me an opening. "Let's talk about that. Why do you say your situation is only bad because you're here in the Rescue Home? What about being in the "dhun-dha[1]" (sex work)? Doesn't that bother you?"

"Why should it bother me? It's far better than backbreaking work all day in the fields, like I used to do back home!"

"But what about your family? Wouldn't you like to go back to them?" I asked, like every pseudo-saviour who wants to "rescue" the poor oppressed sex worker.

Incensed by the very suggestion that she would want to go back to her family, Lakshmi began to reveal her truth, over the next many months, in a torrent of words that left me confounded and transformed my entire perspective on sex work. Here is what she said, for the main part in her own words, in the course of our weekly conversations:

"My family? Let me tell you about my family and then you tell me if you would want to go back to them if you were in my place! I was the fourth daughter born in a dirt-poor landless family, with no option but to work in the fields of the richer farmers. Yet I was named Lakshmi, for the goddess of wealth – ha ha! Some seasons, there was no work. I was lucky to get one meal a day, if that. When there was a drought, we would survive on nothing but rice water for days at a time.

[1] A widely used euphemism in India for sex work, literally meaning "the business"

"Then, when I was fourteen years old, they married me to an old man — he was at least fifty! — just to get me off their hands. And you know why that idiot wanted me, instead of one of my older sisters, and never asked for a dowry? Because he was impotent. And some stupid village witch doctor had told him that if he married a very young virgin, he would be able to get it up.

"Well, it didn't work! He still couldn't get it up — so he beat me every night, as though it was my fault. My mother-in-law and sisters-in-law treated me like a slave, making me do all the hard work in the house. Once, I ran away, back to my village, but my father hauled me back the very next day, and my husband thrashed me again for shaming him and his family.

"I managed to befriend a woman who lived nearby, whom I used to meet every day at the village well. I would pour out my woes and beg her to help. After a few months, she told me that if I wanted, she could arrange for me to go to Bombay, get a job, and get away from all these people. I seized the chance — not even asking what the job was. I was ready to do anything to escape!

"One night, I snuck out of the house when they were all asleep, with a small bundle of clothes I had kept hidden. My friend met me at the edge of the village. We walked all night till we reached the town where the trains to Bombay used to stop. She handed me my ticket and a little money, and told me to look out for a person, in a blue shirt and red cap, when I reached VT[2] station. "Do not get off this train, no matter what, till you reach the end of the journey — VT station," she shouted as the train pulled away.

"It happened exactly as she promised. I reached Bombay, the blue-shirt-red-cap guy spotted me as soon as I got off the train. I was taken to the brothel, welcomed by my madam. She also spoke Telugu, my language! I was given a really good meal, and allowed to rest for two days. During that time, my madam explained what I had to do, and the rules of the house — I had to give her half my earnings in return for what she had paid for me, and for my food and lodging. The rest was mine to spend as I wished. One day a week would be for rest — no clients! Anyone who became violent or misbehaved should be reported to her straight away; he would never be

[2] Victoria Terminus railway station in Mumbai

allowed entry again. She also showed me how to use a condom with the client, so that I would not become pregnant. She gave me makeup and new clothes — the nicest clothes I had ever seen in my life! Oh, and I had to learn some basic Hindi, because that's what our clients mostly spoke.

"I did not mind the dhundha at all. It was easy compared to the work I did in the village. Most of the clients were nice to me — no one ever tried to hit me or make me do weird things, because they knew our madam was very strict, and that our sentry — a tall, hefty man we call "Pathan Bhai[3]" — beat them up. Soon, I had my own set of " regulars" and we became good friends. Some of them would bring me little gifts, on top of the charges they paid: beautiful bangles, sweets, kebabs, chocolates, a Coca-Cola — I had never tasted that before! Once a week, I would go with one of the other girls to the nearby movie theatre and watch the latest film, or go shopping, and eat delicious biriyani.

"I have a really good life now. I have saved more than 5000 rupees. I send money to my parents occasionally, to help them out. They quietly pocket it, though they say their daughter Lakshmi is dead. In another ten years, I will have enough money to buy some land in my village and settle down there, if I want. Won't that be a hoot? I will be a landowner, not a penniless Dalit girl, and they will all have to respect me! Or I may become a madam myself. My madam feels that I would be good at running her place, when she decides to retire. Let's see..."

I was both captivated and flummoxed by Lakshmi's story. I had never encountered such circumstances in my sheltered middle-class life, but I had the sense to accept the stark realities she was placing before me, rather than judge her choices. The part that was hard to stomach, however, was the idea that exchanging sex for money was an acceptable way to make a living, or something any woman would do willingly. And this is what led to my breakthrough moment with Lakshmi.

It was a couple of months after I had gotten all the dimensions of her story. Lakshmi had finally warmed up to me when she realized that I had not condemned her as a loose woman, nor recoiled at her attitude towards her profession.

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[3] Pathans are an ethnic group from Afghanistan, known as fierce warriors

I gently broached the subject of "rehabilitating" her in another line of work. Within seconds, her eyes were alert, her head tilted — she was razor-sharp when it came to sensing what's coming.

"What are you trying to say? Spell it out plainly!" she snapped.

"Just that I could help you find some other kind of job, so that you can get out of the dhundha." I stuttered apologetically — such was this young woman's effect on me.

She didn't take on the issue of the merits or disadvantages of her profession, clever as she was. Instead, she said, with deceptive innocence: "So tell me — what kind of other job could you get me? I am almost illiterate, I have no skills or training, what kind of job could I do?"

"Well," I said tentatively — "We could explore getting you domestic work with a good family…"

"Aha! That's what I thought! So, you think you will save me by making me someone's servant! From morning to night, I will wash their dirty dishes, scrub their dirty clothes, clean their children's dirty bottoms, and probably put up with harassment by some wretched man in their household — because they'll know I was a sex worker! And for all this, how much will I get paid?"

I was feeling quite cowed, but rallied: "About 150 rupees?"

"150 rupees? A month, right? Well, right now, for lying down and getting up, I get 25 rupees each time. Five clients a day, and I earn 125 rupees in ONE DAY! Am I mad to give this up in exchange for being someone's domestic slave? Tell me, does it make any sense?"

I was speechless. Put like that, it certainly didn't make sense. But when Lakshmi saw my crushed expression, she softened and explained patiently as if to a child: "See, you think that because I use that part of my body to earn, I am doing something dirty, a "bad woman". But if I worked with my hands and feet, doing back-breaking work for a pittance, then I become a "good" woman. But that's your way of looking

at the world, those are your rules. In my world, no part of the body is good or bad or sacred. And if you ask any poor village woman, in her secret heart she envies me. I don't have to slave in the hot sun, I get three meals a day, I can save money, I don't have to answer to any man, landlord or husband. Sure, there are problems in the dhundha, bad things do happen, we get diseases, the police harass us, sometimes the clients do too. But I know how to manage all this. So for me, this is what is good — this safety, this income, this control."

Listening to her, I realized how ridiculous my "rehabilitation" proposals seemed from her perspective, and that there were entire dimensions to this whole issue that I had not grasped until then.

This was not the last time that I had my beliefs shattered by the unique choices and compelling logic that seemed to come so instinctively to Lakshmi. On one of my regular visits, she pulled out a letter from her bag and asked me to read it to her. It was from a young man who had been brought to her as a client by his older brother, to "teach" him about sex and its mechanics, since the family was arranging the young man's marriage, and he had to "perform" adequately as a husband. This is still a common practice in a country where any kind of sex education is taboo.

Well, this young man fell madly in love with Lakshmi. He decided she was the only woman he wanted to marry, no matter how different their backgrounds, caste, language, and region, and regardless of her current profession. He refused to meet any of the prospective brides that his parents had lined up and became a regular client, begging Lakshmi to marry him. It was around this time that the brothel was raided by the police, and Lakshmi was brought to the Rescue Home.

Ever since, he had turned up faithfully with small gifts on the one day a week they were allowed visitors. He had even sweet-talked the warden of the Rescue Home to persuade Lakshmi to marry him and regain a respectable position in society. This, essentially, was what he had written in the letter too: "I have everything to offer you: a better life, a respectable place in society, economic security. I don't care that you were in sex work, and I will not let anyone else ill-treat you because of that. Please, please say yes!"

But intriguingly, Lakshmi said no, no, no. Once again, I was baffled. "But why, Lakshmi? Why don't you marry him? He's obviously crazy about you! Don't you like him?"

She smiled mysteriously and said, "Oh, I like him alright. He's a nice guy, but he's a baccha (child)! And it would never work."

"Why not?" I asked.

"It's simple. Right now, he thinks he loves me and will do anything for me. So I have all the power. Once we are married, things will completely change — maybe not immediately, but sooner or later. Once I am his 'wife' he will expect me to become his property, his obedient slave. I will have to cook his food, wash his clothes, abide by his wishes, and be a good little wife! Meanwhile, his family will treat me like shit, because they will know my history, they will know I was a sex worker, and that I am a low-caste Dalit girl. I will have to live every day with their insults and demands. And after a few years, he will forget all about his love for me, he may even start hitting me if I displease him in some way. You see, dear sister, sooner or later I will become an embarrassment to him: the former sex worker he married in a fit of youthful madness, despised by his family, relatives, friends — and by him!"

As I pondered these insights, she added the clincher: "Sorry, but I've had enough of being other people's slave. Never again. I would rather earn my own money, and be my own boss, thank you very much! And if I have to stay in the dhundha to keep my freedom, so be it!"

I saw, in a flash of self-awareness, that I was a raw innocent sitting at the feet of a wise old woman. Lakshmi's sagacity, her clarity and pragmatic approach to her life choices were a turning point in my own journey as a feminist activist and thinker. Most of all, she was the first woman to reveal the huge difference between formal education and real wisdom, and how disconnected they can be. Lakshmi had rehabilitated me by making me revisit all my assumptions, norms, my biases about sex work and sex workers, about marriage as the panacea, about "rehabilitation," and the patriarchal mythology about the "good" and "bad" woman.

The Hundred-Saree Shop

The feminist popular education approach is a potent method to empower marginalized people — especially women — who have been indoctrinated into silent acceptance of oppression and injustice. It involves creating safe spaces where women can share their experiences — painful as well as ordinary — and analyze them in new ways that would not be acceptable elsewhere. They are then able to plan actions to confront their circumstances and challenge the deep-rooted ideologies and socio-economic structures that legitimize and perpetuate these. The process usually has to be catalyzed by external facilitators who support women to explore options and locate their own strategies and solutions.

This is precisely what makes the approach so challenging. Facilitators constantly negotiate the dilemma of whether they should enable women to locate strategies within the limits of their experience and knowledge, or suggest alternatives that the women have never been exposed to. It is a tightrope walk at the best of times.

And so it was, on a steamy monsoon afternoon in Bombay, in the decrepit garage office where the group of us who had founded the NGO SPARC had begun meeting with groups of women pavement dwellers, that the women themselves gave us a powerful and clear insight into this conundrum – and our role in their empowerment.

The women were discussing how they had not been able to get ration cards, which would give them access to staples such as subsidized foodgrains, kerosene for their cookstoves, and basic clothing. The biggest obstacle they faced was that the application for a ration card required a valid postal address. What address could people living in a hut on city pavement possibly give? The women kept asking us what strategies we thought they could use to come up with a viable address. And although we were bubbling with ideas, we clung to our rather literal understanding of the popular education approach and kept throwing the question back at them: What did they think they could do? How did they think the address gap could be overcome?

As this back and forth continued, one of the women, Sagira, lost her temper. “What is the matter with you people?” she snapped. “Why have you been wasting our time

bringing us together to discuss our problems if you won't help us find solutions?"

"Because we don't want to put ideas into your heads. We believe you are best placed to find solutions that would work for you," I said, with a smile on my bespectacled face, trying to pacify her.

"Look," said Sagira, "if we knew how to solve our problems, or could have found the strategies to do so, we wouldn't bother coming to these meetings! And why do you say 'put ideas into your heads'? We want new ideas! That's what we're hoping for from you!

"Think of it this way, dear sister-with-glasses: All my life I have only seen sarees in five colors. That's all the colors that have ever been shown to me! You and the other sisters here, you are educated, you have seen much more of the world. I'm not saying you are smarter than us — none of you could survive the conditions we live in! But I know for sure that you have been to shops with hundreds of sarees, in dozens of colors! You understand what I'm saying? You need to take us to the hundred-saree shop — you need to tell us about possibilities, solutions that we have never seen or heard of! Otherwise, you are wasting your time with us, and worse, we are wasting our time with you.

"So come on, sisters — stop wasting time! Take us to the hundred-saree shop!"

And that is precisely what we did. We took them through a range of alternatives, to tackle their lack of a valid address, to insist on being given application forms as their right and, eventually, to get the actual ration cards. In another leap forward, they decided to assert their right to be identified as joint heads of households and ensured that the ration cards were issued in their names, rather than their spouses'.

Because, as Sagira wisely said, "Who has to worry about kerosene for the cookstove? Who has to cook and provide food for the family? We women do! So our names should be on the ration cards as head of the household."

What Are 'Women's Issues'?

The 1980s were a time of strong and frequently stormy divisions among feminists and within the women's movement in India. "Liberal feminists," "radical feminists" and "socialist feminists" each had distinct analyses and positions on the discrimination against women and varying beliefs about the route to greater equality and rights. A passionate discourse had emerged among feminists as well as in the media and development circles, but with little clarity about what constituted a "women's issue".

If one studied the patterns within these debates, it was clear that the feminists of that time believed that violence against women, including domestic violence, dowry harassment, sexual harassment of women in the workplace and public spaces, rape and female foeticide, were considered the most burning "women's issues". Subtly, this evolved into the implicit requirement that only those working on these issues were truly feminist and part of the "feminist movement". A distinction emerged between what was termed the "women's movement", those working with women but not really feminist in their politics — and the "feminist movement", comprising those who explicitly embraced a feminist ideology and prioritized the issues of violence. So, even if you had mobilized and built mass movements of thousands of the most marginalized and stigmatized women, you were not considered adequately feminist, or part of the broader movement, if your priorities and actions were not focused on these particular issues.

Our organization SPARC, which a group of us had founded in 1985 to work with the women living in Bombay's pavement slums, fell into this trap. We had mobilized over 30,000 of the poorest women in the city who had been ignored even by organizations working with slum-dwellers and the urban poor. Using a feminist popular education approach, we had supported these women to take the lead in their communities' struggle for secure housing and access to basic rights and entitlements like water, toilets, ration cards and healthcare. We were surprised, therefore, when we were refused a space in the national feminist conference because we were considered to be doing "community organizing" and not feminist activism!


WATER
LADIES
RATION
CARD

This did not disturb us too much since we had learnt from the women we worked with that our work was indeed feminist — it was focused on "women's issues" as defined by them. Even if we did not use feminist rhetoric or jargon, we were undeniably engaged in feminist movement-building.

Much of our clarity about this came from a catalytic conversation between several members of the pavement dweller women's collectives and some of Bombay's feminist icons. These feminists had heard about our work, were intrigued, and asked to visit us and talk with the women. A date and time were fixed, and the interaction took place one afternoon.

After introducing themselves, the feminists asked the assembled women: "What are the main issues that you are working on? What are the changes that you'd like to see in your lives?"

Different voices immediately responded:

"How do we stop our huts from being demolished periodically by the city authorities?"

"We need ration cards to buy subsidized foodgrains — living on the pavement with no proper address makes this a big challenge."

"We struggle every day for water — for drinking, bathing, cooking."

"We need toilets nearby, so we are not forced to use public spots at night."

"A safer place to live with secure land title, so that we can't be thrown out or constantly displaced."

The list went on. Our feminist visitors did not seem impressed — in fact, one was visibly annoyed! "But what about *women's* issues," she asked. "Aren't you bothered about those?"

"What do you mean by 'women's issues'?" challenged Madina, one of the sharpest women in the group.

"Well, things like wife-beating, sexual harassment, rape — issues like that," the feminist responded.

"Well," said Madina, her voice dripping with sarcasm, "that's the difference between you and us! What we consider 'women's issues' are the things that women struggle with every day, which the men don't have to bother about! A man — he can pee anywhere, shit anywhere, sleep anywhere! He comes back at the end of the work day and expects a hot meal. It is we women who make sure there is cooked food, water to drink and wash, that the children and the elderly are cared for, and that there is enough food for everyone, no matter how little we earn!

"So, my dear sister, here's what we consider 'women's issues': steady, secure income and employment, affordable food, secure and permanent housing so that we don't have to live like dogs on the street, a decent toilet, adequate water, a greater voice in community decision-making and government policies, and an end to the wars, conflicts and policies that destroy our livelihoods, communities and environments, that displace us and make us refugees in our own country...."

"And," Lakshmi chimed in, rising to her feet: "What you call 'women's issues' are what we consider *community* issues — problems that the entire community must take responsibility for. How can we women solve them on our own, if men are not held accountable? Why should women alone rise up against rape and sexual violence? Against wife-beating, dowry deaths, female foeticide, and all kinds of violence? Why should we alone be concerned about the care and safety of our children, or the elderly and the sick?"

Ever the satirical one, Sakina, delivered a powerful finale: "If there is an epidemic of rabies because mad dogs are roaming the streets and biting people, do we ask, 'what are the dog-bite victims doing about this issue?' Do you see the difference in what we consider women's issues and community issues? It's time you did!"

The visitors were visibly shaken, though not entirely convinced. They shook their heads, saddened by our failure to instill a more feminist consciousness in the women we had organized. But as they took their leave, I was sure that at least some of them would reconsider their construction of what "women's issues" were.

What No One Can Steal from You

Knowledge is power: that was the central idea driving the Mahila Samakhya program of women's empowerment launched in the late 1980s in the Indian states of Gujarat, Karnataka and Uttar Pradesh. The core methodology was what we now call feminist popular education: to mobilize the poorest and most marginalized women into collectives, where they would be enabled to recognize and value their innate knowledge, access new knowledge and critically analyze their situation, and ignite their passion to change their realities through collective action.

In a bold and creative step that combined expanding women's access to new knowledge with building their solidarity with grassroots women from other districts, the Karnataka Mahila Samakhya team conceptualized and organized a unique event: the "Mahila Mahiti Mela" (Women's Knowledge Fair) in early 1991, some two years after the program had begun work in the state. Even within this short time, the activists had successfully mobilized thousands of Dalit, indigenous and other marginalized women in the three districts of Bidar, Bijapur and Mysore into stable village-level collectives. The activists felt it was the right time to bring these women together across districts, to feel they were part of a bigger movement, by participating in such an event.

Much thought went into planning the Mela, the largest-ever event held by the program. Through collective discussion, we decided to make it a three-day event, and hold it in Bidar district, outside Bidar town. We formed committees to oversee the catering, water supply and sanitation, transport, logistics, and other details. Even the Boy Scouts were pressed into service to help with serving the food! Most importantly, we designed the mini tent-city as a large quadrangle, with a wide-open space in the center.

Each corner of the square had a "knowledge tent" where information sessions would be held on issues such as the law and women's rights, women's health and nutrition, appropriate technology such as smokeless stoves, government agricultural and animal husbandry schemes for low-income groups, special schemes for women, and better livelihoods. Resource persons to handle each session were chosen with care, to

ensure a feminist perspective. Local officials from various government departments were also prepared and sensitized ahead of their sessions.

Each village-level collective ("sangha") was asked to choose up to three women who could attend the knowledge fair and share their learnings with the collective when they returned. The women's collectives were delighted to receive printed invitations to the fair, which gave the event a festive feel. Several women said, "We've never felt so important or special before — it's like we've been invited to a wedding!"

The expenses of these representatives would be covered, the bus journeys organized, and their food and other needs provided at the venue. It was each collective's task, over the next several weeks, to plan how the participants' care work and other duties could be shared by other members of the collective, if necessary. It was the first time that most of the women had traveled out of their district, and certainly the first time they had traveled this so far unaccompanied by a male relative. The journey itself was a huge source of empowerment and pride.

"Where did you come from?" they would ask each other.

"From Bijapur," someone would reply.

"Oh, that's nothing! We have come all the way from Mysore district, in the south, traveling almost 900 kilometres!"

The atmosphere at the fair was electric. There was a sense of excitement and adventure among the women, among the visitors and resource persons who had traveled long distances to experience this unique event, and of course, within the Mahila Samakhya team. Logistically, it was flawless — food, water and sanitation arrangements worked perfectly for the over 1,200 people present. Every knowledge tent was filled to capacity. The women attended each session, along with Mahila Samakhya activists from their districts. They were serious and focused, determined not to miss out on any bit of information. The discussions and debates that followed were lively.

In the evenings, the "Mahiti Aangan" (the knowledge courtyard) became a space for music, dancing, and laughter. Women would perform their own unique folk dances, and even those from communities that frowned on women dancing would jump up and join in, learning the moves and laughing with joy at this newfound freedom and power. It ignited an intense sense of sisterhood, comradeship, and passion for their shared struggle to change their lives and worlds. They began to see themselves as part of a larger movement for gender and social justice. On the last evening, the women formed a circle in the courtyard, holding hands, eyes bright with tears of joy and hope, and raised the slogan "Mahila Shaktige Jayavaagali!" ("long live women's empowerment!").

When they returned home, it was a different story. There was palpable resentment from the men who were afraid that there was no turning back, that these women had experienced something so transformative, so empowering, that they would never again be content with their traditional roles in the family and household. There was also jealousy — most of the men had never been so far from their home villages. In every district, many men, and some of the older women, did their best to pull down the Mahiti Mela participants, to put them back in their place. But the women, transformed by their journey, their three days together with hundreds of others, and by their new knowledge, were not to be cowed.

In one Mysore village, for instance, the women were taunted by a group of men as they walked to the collective meeting:

"Look at them, walking like proud peacocks, thinking no end of themselves!"

"After all, they are now big know-it-alls, after going to a 'knowledge fair'!"

The women good-naturedly teased back, trying not to react to these childish provocations. "Yes, yes, we are know-it-alls! What to do? Our heads are swollen with knowledge!"

Then, one of the men said, "So tell me, sister, what did you get for all the wages you lost and money spent traveling so far? Was it a cow? Some goats or chickens? Did you get a piece of jewelry? No? Show us what you got."

The group of women turned and faced their challengers as a unit. Gangamma, the oldest of the three women, spat out: “No, you idiots! We did not get a cow, goats, chickens, or jewelry! These things can be stolen from you by any common thief — in fact, by any of you! Instead, we got something that no one can ever steal from us! Do you know what that is? What is it that no one can steal?”

The men looked dumbfounded. They whispered among themselves, trying to guess the answer.

“Just as I thought,” Gangamma said. “Not one of you fools can answer us! We found knowledge, ideas, and new ways of thinking. Can anyone take these treasures from us, unless we decide to share them?”

The men shook their heads.

“So that’s what we got at the Mahiti Mela — a treasure more valuable than gold!” And with these parting words, the women marched off in triumph.

The War in Iraq and Us

Part of the way we subconsciously practice social power — as feminist and social justice activists from more privileged groups — is to decide what the poor can and cannot grasp, or what issues they would be interested in. This is especially true in our work with poor grassroots women. There is often an assumption that they are only interested in issues and information that directly affect their lives, or what we have decided is within their grasp. So we rarely, if ever, discuss so-called "global" or "national" issues with them even in our awareness-building work.

In the Mahila Samakhya women's empowerment program in Karnataka, in southern India, we decided to challenge this approach and discuss a range of current affairs issues with the women's collectives ("sanghas" in the Kannada language). This was why, when Iraq invaded Kuwait in 1990, our activists were equipped to talk with the sangha women about the First Gulf War and why it affected and mattered to all of us around the world. This is the story of the impact that conversation had in just one sangha in Bijapur district, Karnataka.

The discussion of the Gulf War involved several exciting steps: first, showing the women a map of the world — something they had never seen before — and where India, Kuwait, Iraq, and the US were located.

"Where are these places?" one woman asked. "What does 'country' mean? Is our Bijapur a country?" another wanted to know.

This led to an exploration of the political concept of "nations", some basic information on geography, and an understanding of the huge distances and oceans separating regions and countries of the world.

"How did people reach such faraway places? Do those places look the same as ours? What crops do they grow? What do people eat there?" The women were fascinated.

They also wanted an explanation of the political and economic factors behind the war, and why a country as distant from Iraq as the United States would care about Iraq's invasion of Kuwait. The discussion continued over many weeks and sangha

meetings, with the women eager to know more.

"Why does no one tell us about all these things?" they fumed. "We are not children! At home, when we tell the elders and the men about what we learned, they also wanted to know more.They now look at us with different eyes. Earlier, some would make fun of our sanghas and meetings, but now they understand and respect the knowledge we are gaining."

Meanwhile, another key activity of the sangha continued: adult literacy classes for the women, often taught by one of the high school children in the village, or by an instructor of the government, or even by our own activists. We were concerned about one unfortunate byproduct of adult literacy efforts: a rapid relapse into illiteracy when there are few opportunities for newly literate women to practice their newly-acquired reading and writing skills.

To address this, Mahila Samakhya teams developed an innovative approach to sustaining literacy in all the program districts: creating simple neo-literacy journals, written and read by the newly literate women themselves. The journals were given catchy names in each district: *Helu-Kelu* (Speak, Listen), *Namma-Nimma Maathu* (Your Words, My Words), and *Sollu* (Words/Speech). The monthly edition contained women's news, thoughts, ideas, and even opinion pieces.

Inevitably, one of the women in Bijapur soon wrote a short article on the Gulf War: "The War in Iraq and Us". In simple words, she explained how the conflict was essentially about the control of petroleum, and that it should matter to all poor women because it would affect the availability of affordable kerosene for their lamps and cookstoves, and the cost of bus fare. Women readers in the other districts were fascinated and the article excited a range of other discussions.

In this way, expanding the knowledge horizons of poor rural women converged with adult literacy to create a unique initiative that not only helped them sustain their literacy, but also to feel they were global citizens. From then on, sangha discussions were never limited to local matters or the injustices, needs and priorities of women. There was always something from beyond their borders on the agenda. The women never saw these other topics as irrelevant or beyond their grasp — they embraced them as part and parcel of their empowerment. And in turn, it compelled us as change agents to shift our own perspectives — to respect their capacity to be global citizens.

Come Straight to the Point!

By the early 1990s, the movement of the women pavement dwellers of Bombay had grown in both strength and purpose. The women called themselves "Mahila Milan", meaning, the convergence of women. The women had also formed an alliance with the local chapter of the National Slum Dwellers Federation — a longstanding body that had been, until then, dominated by male leadership, priorities, and perspectives.

Through this alliance-building process, the women had mobilized many of their local men to support them and even counter or neutralize the men who challenged or opposed their leadership. Men like Rafiq the taxi driver, Shakoor the street vendor, and many others openly and actively backed Mahila Milan, attended their meetings, and accompanied them in many of their actions. These men were remarkable in that they never attempted to displace the women's leadership. They understood the importance of women being at the forefront of the struggles for secure housing, basic amenities and entitlements like ration cards, realizing that the women were more deeply affected by the lack of these rights.

With support from our NGO, SPARC[1], Mahila Milan began holding annual retreats to reflect on the achievements and challenges of the past year and strategize for the year ahead. The 1991 retreat was held in a large space by the seaside, far from the hustle and bustle of their daily lives and work. A lively discussion was underway about the progress made in lobbying government authorities for allotting tenured land to their communities, so they could get off the pavements and live in better conditions.

Describing the Mahila Milan leadership group's meetings with city officials, Mehrunissa digressed in her usual manner. She began to talk about which meeting she couldn't attend because her child was sick, or because she was late with cooking, or was fasting for Ramadan and too tired. Rafiq listened with growing impatience and finally interrupted Mehrunissa's saga:

"Aapa (big sister)," he said, "Why can't you walk in a straight line? Why do you

[1] Society for Promotion of Area Resource Centres, see www.sparcindia.org

wander all over the place instead of just telling us what happened with the issue we're discussing? Why must we also hear about your sick child, your cooking, and your fasting? Why not come straight to the point?"

Mehrunissa was shocked and deeply hurt. Her eyes filled with tears, but she burst out in rage:

"Because that's the difference between you men and us women, brother Rafiq! That's what our lives are like. When you go to work, you think of nothing else — what labour you will do, how much you'll earn, and when your day will end. You know someone else is caring for your children and parents, buying and cooking the food and keeping a meal ready for you in the evening.

"Well, my impatient brother, women's lives are not like that! Yes, we are part of this movement and, yes, we work constantly to achieve our goals, but we cannot go in a straight line! As we walk to our work, we have to worry about when to get the wheat flour and vegetables, what time to pick up the child from school, how to take your sick mother to the hospital, and how to finish the cooking in time for our evening work shift. You can walk in a straight line because you don't have to bother about any of these things – some woman in your family is doing it all so that you can saunter off, thinking only of your day's work and your evening booze!"

The room was silenced by Mehrunissa's words, awestruck by their truth and power. The men hung their heads. The women wiped away tears of empathy. But good-humored soul that he was, Rafiq was humbled but not shaken by Mehrunissa's anger. He stood up with a big grin, walked across the room and prostrated himself in front of her.

"My dear Aapa, I was wrong and stand corrected! I'll never forget the lesson you taught me today. I honor you and all my sisters for juggling all these responsibilities and still working so hard for our cause. My salaams to all of you! I beg your forgiveness!" Mehrunissa's heart melted. She touched Rafiq's bowed head in blessing, and said simply, "I forgive you."

DOING THINGS **differently**

Who Drew These Lines?

The Roma (or Romani) people, often called "gypsies", are arguably among the most unique ethnic groups in the world. Their history is shrouded in mystery, but their origins lie in South Asia, probably from the central and northwestern regions of the Indian subcontinent. Between the 7th and 14th centuries CE, they spread out across Central Asia and into Europe and even China, according to some accounts. They are believed to have followed the retreating armies of various generals who raided parts of what are now Pakistan and northern India. Since the Roma were mainly traders, tinkers, metal-workers, smiths and musicians, they were permitted to follow the armies and provide these services. The largest numbers settled in Central and Eastern Europe, though Roma communities can be found across Western Europe and the United Kingdom.

I first learned about the Roma in the late 1990s, when a friend lent me the book *Bury Me Standing – The Gypsies and Their Journey* by Isabel Fonseca. I was fascinated by the idea of a people whose worldview does not acknowledge nationality or borders but believes that the whole world is theirs — that they are free to travel and settle wherever they wish. The Roma motto is "***the road is good***" — celebrating the freedom to move from place to place, to enjoy the journey rather than fixate on a destination. They have no concept of patriotism or loyalty to any country or leader, and they often officially claim the faith of the society in which they found themselves, though few practice it.

It was a personal encounter with an amazing Roma feminist activist that led me deeper into their unique history and culture, to realize the stigma and discrimination they face across Europe, and their struggle to build a transnational Roma movement for their rights. The encounter took place at the Ninth AWID Forum in Guadalajara, Mexico, in October 2002. I was dressed in a saree for the grand banquet hosted by the mayor of Guadalajara on the second day of the Forum, organized in the open-air courtyard of a historic convent and retreat center in the city. It soon began to pour, and we rushed into the sheltered walkways surrounding the courtyard. I was trying

to wring out the water from my saree when a young woman standing nearby approached me and said, quite deadpan:

"You are Indian, I am Indian."

Delighted but puzzled, I asked, "Which part of India are you from?"

"Oh, I'm not from India – I'm from Serbia. But I'm a Roma, and we're all originally from India!"

We launched into an intense conversation. Her name was Anisa, and she was surprised at what I knew about Roma history and culture — thanks to Fonseca's book. We spoke about the stigma and persecution of the Roma in Europe, and the impact on Roma women. I told her about my research on transnational grassroots movements, and my desire to learn more about the Roma people's cross-border organizing in Europe. She graciously offered to connect me with Roma women's groups in the Balkans, should I plan a visit — though she was clearly skeptical about how serious I was.

But serious I was, and a research trip was duly planned. The delayed approval of my visa for Serbia, and outright refusal of one for Macedonia, foreshadowed the official attitude towards research on the Roma situation in those countries — not to mention towards my Indian citizenship. Anisa had warned me to expect a lot of racism in Serbia. She said that given my skin color and features, I would be identified as a Roma woman and might not be given entry or service in restaurants, and may be treated discourteously in shops and hotels.

Nevertheless, I was not prepared for what was to come. Anisa's prophecy came true at the airport itself. When my blond, blue-eyed American research assistant Sarah and I arrived in Belgrade in April 2003, she sailed through Immigration without a single question while I was held up by a very hostile immigration officer.

He looked at my passport and at me repeatedly, then growled: "Why you come here?" "I am doing some research on Roma women," I replied politely, handing over the letter from the head of my center at the Kennedy School of Harvard University, which

I had carried anticipating precisely this kind of hostility. He tried to read the letter, but his English wasn't good enough to grasp it fully, so he switched tracks.

"Do you have money?" he demanded, and when I nodded, "Show me the money!"

I placed my travelers' checks — worth nearly $1,500 — on the counter. He snatched them, shoved them into my passport, barked, "Wait here!" and walked away.

Twenty minutes later, he returned, stamped my passport and handed it back with the travelers' checks. I grabbed everything and ran into the baggage collection area before any further unpleasantness could occur. I found Sarah fretting and tense, wondering what had happened to me. While we waited for our bags, I transferred the travelers' checks to my handbag — only to discover that a whopping $300 was missing. There was nothing to be done but grin and bear it.

Over the next two days in Belgrade, more of Anisa's predictions came true. In at least two restaurants where we attempted to have a meal, the waitstaff never came near our table, and when Sarah flagged them over, they would give her a menu and walk away, ignoring me. They would return, write down her order, but refuse to listen to mine. At other places, we were turned away by restaurant managers saying, "Sorry, private party tonight!" — this was code, Anisa had told me, for "no entry for Roma or other brown-skinned people". After the third or fourth such incident, we stepped on to the pavement and Sarah burst into tears. She had never witnessed such blatant racism in the United States and couldn't understand my composure in the face of it.

"Why aren't you angry?" she cried. "This is outrageous! We must report it!"

"I am angry, Sarah — but more than that, I am humbled," I said. "This is exactly how people from stigmatized castes have been treated in India for centuries. Even today, a Dalit woman cannot enter a village tea shop or buy a cup of tea there. I come from the most privileged class in my country — I've always been treated with deference. This is an important lesson in what it's like to be despised and excluded because of your identity. It is also a powerful insight into the Roma experience."

Over the next day and a half, we had intense discussions with our Roma colleagues from Macedonia, who had to come to Belgrade to meet us since, without a visa, I couldn't go to them. We then traveled on to Kragujevac where the Roma Information Centre was located, to understand how they supported Roma groups — especially women's groups — to network and build a transnational movement. We visited the Roma genocide memorial, marking the slaughter of over half a million European Roma and Sinti people by the Nazis during the Second World War. And it was here, in Kragujevac, from conversations with grassroots Roma women in a local settlement, that the title of this story emerged.

When we arrived, the women were delighted to see me dressed in Indian clothes. "Amaari," they kept saying — she is one of us! This acknowledgement of our shared origins made me feel welcomed and accepted. They spoke a mix of Romani and SerboCroatian but asked, through our Roma colleague, whether I spoke Hindi. When I said yes, one of the older women came up to me with a smile and touched my nose.

"Naak," I said, meaning "nose" in Hindi. Delighted exclamations followed — the same word in Romani! She then touched my eye. "Aankh," I said. Nodding and giggles — the same word! Then she touched my cheek. "Gaal," I said. Laughter and applause as the woman, whose name was Nasra, embraced me and said, "We are so happy you've come so far to see us! We've never met anyone from the home country!"

The conversation that followed was wide-ranging. They described the stigma and discrimination they faced in Serbian society, especially in accessing public services — problems that were nowhere as blatant during the Soviet era. The women spoke with anger and pain about injustices in their daily lives. This led, inevitably, to a conversation about the gender inequalities within their own community. Throughout the discussion, I was struck by the fact that they spoke of Serbia as though it was someone else's country, not one in which they were born and lived in all their lives, and of which, at least formally, they were citizens. Finally, I raised this question — and learned one of the most profound lessons of my life.

"Do you consider yourself Serbian? Did your elders consider themselves Yugoslavian, when it was part of Yugoslavia?" I asked.

"No, no, we are not Serbian! We are Roma!" Nasra said.

"But your grandparents and parents, your children and grandchildren — you were all born here and have lived here all your lives. Why don't you feel you belong?" I queried.

"Because we are Roma! Do you understand? Our people have always traveled and lived in different places but remained Roma. Because we are Roma, we can go where we wish — the whole world is ours!"

"So you do not believe in the concept of country? Nation? Loyalty or patriotism towards a particular nation?" My tone must have revealed my surprise, or even a hint of disapproval, because Nasra retorted angrily:

"Who drew these lines on the earth and decided 'this is our land', 'that is yours', 'you can't come here', 'you're not welcome there'? **Who?** Not the Roma! These borders were made by selfish, power-hungry men who wanted to control the land and to exploit people. The Roma have never claimed ownership of any piece of the earth! Because the earth belongs to all of us! We have never taken up arms or fought and killed each other for any piece of land! And yet, they call **us** stupid, vagabonds, savages! But we are not the savages, are we?"

I was too stunned to speak. I closed my eyes and contemplated Nasra's powerful words, the profound truth in them. The others were silent too, worried that I was offended. Some instinct told me that I had to acknowledge Nasra's wisdom, but in some non-verbal, culturally grounded way. So I rose, walked over to her, and bowed deeply with folded hands. She began to cry and embraced me, apologizing. I assured her no apology was needed. She had compelled me to think about nationality, identity and belonging in a whole new way. I was deeply indebted to her and to her people, whose vision of the world was so boundless.

Give Us Proper Houses!

When we founded SPARC[1] and began working with women living in the pavement slums along the busy streets of south Bombay (now Mumbai), we were acutely conscious of how our privileged backgrounds distanced us from them. Our clothes, our demeanor, the fact that we lived securely in apartment buildings that would never be demolished, our language, even our hair and skin set us apart.

Our consciousness of this class difference — among other things — was sharper because we had decided to use the feminist popular education approach. This meant that we were not about to offer the women anything concrete that would immediately improve their income or living conditions — no loans, training or income-generation schemes, no clinics or free medical care, no help for better housing, no crèches or other services for their children. It was therefore inevitable that most of the women were quite hostile, in the initial months, to our attempts to motivate them to come together and discuss how to collectively press for change.

"If you have nothing to give us, why are you wasting our time?"

This was the reaction we frequently encountered. We had developed a range of responses, trying to explain that we wanted to create a space where the women could come together and come up with their own strategies to tackle their problems, and that what we could offer was information and ideas to support them. Sometimes, humor was the best response.

My colleague Leena was the least disheartened by the women's skepticism and the cleverest at handling it. She was gifted in using her natural playfulness and gamin smile. In one street, for example, several women challenged her, saying: "Are you going to give us proper houses? If you do that, we'll come to your meeting!"

Leena was carrying a large cloth shoulder bag. She put her hand inside and pretended

[1] In the year 1985 – see www.sparcindia.org

to take something out, then mimed handing over this invisible object to each of the women.

"You want a house? Here's a house! And here's a blue one for you! And a red one for you! And here's another for you!" They laughed, somewhat reluctantly.

Leena continued: "If we had houses to give you, why would we waste our time walking the streets in this heat trying to talk to you? Are we mad? Are we the government? Why would we ask you to meet us and all the other women living on the pavements and dreaming of a proper house? No one is going to give you a house just because you are poor and living on the pavement. You have to sit together and figure out how to convince the government to give you land where you can build a proper house. And that's not going to happen in a hurry, so we need to meet and plan how to achieve this!"

Leena's humor got through to them in a way that our pious responses had not. The women were struck by the truth behind her blunt words. Gradually, a few women from each pavement cluster began to show up at our weekly meetings. Lively discussions ensued on the risks of pavement living, and how to secure permanent and legal housing. More women joined, motivated by their neighbors. They spoke of their reasons for migrating to the city, the rural poverty they had escaped, and the unaffordability of even a slum hut in Bombay, which had pushed them to the pavements — and how, despite this, they were far better off than ever.

Madina, one of the strongest and most articulate of the women, put it like this: "Here in Bombay, we live like stray dogs on the street, but we eat like kings!"

In a surprisingly short time, a strong network of women had formed. Key participants began holding discussions with other women in their own streets. They called themselves Mahila Milan, "Women Together".

Our SPARC team began sourcing information about government-controlled vacant lands in the city. The women developed elaborate criteria to assess these potential sites, such as distance from their current workplaces, additional costs of commuting

by rail or bus, schooling for the children, and so forth. One of the first things that the emerging collectives did was to visit these areas in groups, to decide which ones to petition city and state authorities for their relocation.

Just as the women's mobilization was gaining strength, a setback occurred. Political leaders mounted a draconian attempt to "clean up" the city's streets, bulldozing the pavement huts and sending the pavement dwellers "back to where they came from". After several violent demolitions, a group of legal activists intervened and managed to stay the evictions through an order from the high court.

That's when we realized that there was no accurate data on the population of pavement dwellers in the city. The numbers tossed around were ludicrous, from millions to hundreds of thousands. The dominant narrative — especially in the media — contained many myths and biases, such as the idea that this was a transient population. There was little understanding of their places of origin, their reasons for migration, how long they had lived in the city, or their unrecognized but hugely valuable contribution to the city's labor force and economy.

We decided that the best intervention in the ongoing crisis and debate would be to generate some actual numbers. So, we designed and executed a census of pavement dwellers, which covered all the 6,000-plus households living in the southern half of the city, and released this data at a press conference. The name of our census report captured the public imagination: "We, the Invisible,"[2] implying that pavement dwellers were invisible in terms of their true stories and contribution to the city.

The stay on demolitions and the sobering realities of our census data allowed us to petition the city and state authorities. We argued that given their significant economic contribution to the city (proved by our data), pavement dwellers should be rehoused in areas where they could be given secure housing and tenure. We brought in architects to help women envision and design their own homes, within government guidelines for low-income housing. The women and their families would help construct these as and when they were relocated, rather than accepting inappropriately designed public housing. During this process, the women made a huge conceptual

[2] See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/We,_the_Invisible

and strategic leap: if they were indeed given land to build more permanent houses, the title to these would be in the women's names – because safe and permanent housing was a women's issue[3].

It took nearly twenty years for the women to achieve their dream but achieve it they did. During this time, they helped mobilize urban poor women across the country and even in cities around the world. Mahila Milan formed an alliance with the National Slum Dwellers Federation in India (NSDF) and negotiated an agreement that all new housing obtained by the urban poor would be in women's names, and that all advocacy with government authorities would include women's voices and perspectives. The entire strategy that Mahila Milan and SPARC innovated became the model for movements of the urban poor around the world.

So yes, Lakshmi, Madina, Sakina, Mehrunissa, Jijabai, and all your hundreds of sisters, you got proper houses! But not as handouts from us middle-class activists or a benign government, but as a result of your own collective strength, persistence and struggle.

[3] As asserted by Madina in the story "What Are Women's Issues?"

Who Owns, Who Controls

Participatory research has different meanings and methods. Some of us discovered its power in a particularly complex and challenging context.

We had decided to conduct a study of the status of rural women in Karnataka, the southern Indian state where our research institute was based. The catalyst for the research was our concern about the lack of a clear definition or disaggregation of the term 'status of women'. Reviewing the existing literature and research, we realized it was largely defined more by default: the parameters used by a given study or analysis of existing data became the de facto definition of status — and these were highly diverse, even contradictory.

And so, most women's studies research in India seemed to have analyzed the situation of women vis-à-vis men using existing national or state-level statistics: demographic data, employment status and labor force participation, educational levels, health data, legal rights, and political representation and participation. A few studies included the incidence and prevalence of violence against women. But these parameters posed a problem: they were determined and limited by the data available, as well as by the inherent gender blindness or biases of the formal information system. And indeed, are these what determine the status of women in reality? For example, women's work participation rates or income became measures of status — without telling us anything about women's control over this income, their constraints in the labour market, or what household or productive assets they own or control.

We therefore engaged in intensive brainstorming and developed our own framework — greatly inspired and informed by the work of other feminists. Our framework assessed women's status vis-à-vis men within the same households, examining their relative access to or control over eight types of public and private resources: private assets and resources (land, house, food), public resources (health care, education, other public services), employment, labour and income, the body and physical security (reproduction, violence), mobility, political participation, "intangible" resources (influence, social safety nets), and access to justice/redressal[1].

[1] See S.Batliwala et al, 1998, "The Status of Women in Rural Karnataka", Bangalore: National Institute of Advanced Studies, http://eprints.nias.res.in/475/1/Status%20of%20Rural%20Women%20in%20Karnataka.pdf


LAND
DEED

The study was not done in the usual way — where researchers swoop in, extract data and are never heard from again. Instead, we partnered with six local NGOs and women's organizations working in six representative districts and ensured that all the data collected from that district was shared with the partner, along with the analysis and the results of the overall study. These partners also helped us identify data collectors from their areas, to ensure communication in the local dialects.

We developed a preliminary questionnaire and pilot-tested it. While most questions were understood by the respondents, and they were able to answer clearly, one caused a great deal of confusion. It was part of the section designed to assess *control* over private assets, asking not just who owns the house, cattle, poultry, agricultural land (if any), and so forth — we trying to understand the difference between *ownership* versus *control* of assets. This question was critical because we knew from related research and grassroots experience that land reform laws had led to land being put in women's names, while actual control remained with the men. Similarly, benefits from government schemes for women's economic development had led to men taking over assets like vegetable gardens, poultry, livestock, and even business loans given to their wives or mothers.

However, we had framed the question about control in an awkward and totally ineffective way. Women responding to the question found it abstract and confusing. They kept naming the formal owner (usually a husband, brother-in-law or father-in-law), unable to grasp what we were getting at. In our minds, the question was framed correctly: Who has rights over the asset (signifying control), vs who has formal ownership? But this framing resulted in ownership and control being one and the same in the respondents' minds. When the team that did the pilot study reported this back to us, we decided to go and meet the study participants ourselves, to explore how to get to this sensitive information in a more effective way.

After our rather convoluted explanation, one of the women, Chennamma, became visibly impatient.

"Sisters, what on earth are you trying to get at?" Chennamma asked. "Can you explain, in simple language, what is the difference you are trying to discover? This question, as it is, makes no sense to us!"

We then explained that while a particular person can own something on paper – like land or a house — they are often unable to make decisions about it. We gave the example of how land or other assets are often put in women's names because the rules demand that the beneficiaries be women, but these women usually don't have much say over the use of the asset or even the income generated from it.

Chennamma broke into a big smile. "So that's what you want to know? That's so simple! Just ask: 'What asset can you sell in an emergency without asking anyone's permission?' That will get you the information you want!"

Chennamma's suggestion worked beautifully! Every single respondent, woman or man, immediately understood the question and responded with clarity. The data generated, thanks to this simple change, was remarkable and nuanced. For example, women named their personal jewelry, and sometimes, their poultry or pots and pans, as the only assets they could sell in an emergency without anyone's permission. But when the men were asked the same question, they named exactly the same assets: the wife's jewelry, poultry, etc. We had expected the men to name their land, cattle, or farming equipment but surprisingly, they stated that these assets were too valuable to sell without discussion with their elders, while their wives' assets could be treated as their own!

Not only did the study prove that women's control over their own assets was questionable, but that it is essential to design our research studies in active collaboration with the people whose issues we are trying to better understand. They are valuable guides in discovering not only what to ask, but how. The data that emerged from the 1,200 women and 1,200 men who participated in the study and responded to this question prompted our local partner organizations to launch strong campaigns not only for the shared formal ownership of major assets, but for equal decision-making power over them. Such is the power of participatory research!

How Many Goats Are Enough?

In the 1970s, ’80s and early ’90s, the central and state governments in India ran several large-scale poverty-alleviation programs targeting the rural poor, including some that focused on women. These included handouts such as widow pensions, employment guarantees during non-farming seasons, free seeds to promote fruit and vegetable cultivation, and livestock, such as goats and chickens.

While these programs were well-intentioned, there was inevitably “slippage” and “leakage”, meaning their benefits either did not always reach the people intended, were siphoned off into other hands, or remained underutilized. No one had thought to design these programs in consultation with the people they were intended for, so there were often fundamental flaws that reduced their impact. This story illustrates this gap. It was related by a gentleman who worked as an advisor to the government department responsible for such a program in the western Indian state of Maharashtra. Let us call him Mr Kotnis.

Kotnis was not satisfied sitting in his office and advising at official meetings. He couldn’t understand why the programs were not creating the impact they should and wanted to better grasp what was happening at the grassroots level. He insisted that local officials take him to the villages, so that he could speak directly with the people targeted by the program and understand their perspective.

On one visit, the focus was on an animal husbandry scheme that would distribute goats to low-income individuals, half of whom were women. They came to a small village and sought out the hut in which lived Gangutai, a widowed grandmother. Gangutai was poor and non-literate; she did agricultural wage-work for a living, and looked after her schoolboy grandson. Her son and daughter-in-law had migrated to the city and worked as construction workers, sending whatever small amount they could spare from time to time.

Kotnis was excited. Gangutai seemed an ideal candidate for the goat scheme! So, after a few polite preliminaries, he said with a smile: “Gangutai, you will be happy to

know that you are eligible for this new government scheme – you will receive free goats to help boost your income!"

Surprisingly unimpressed, Gangutai asked: "How many goats will be given?" "Ten," said Kotnis.

"Well, that's too many. I only want four!" she declared.

Kotnis was astonished, as were the accompanying local officials. Who on earth would anyone ask for less than what was being offered? Kotnis asked: "But why, Gangutai? Why would you want only four goats instead of ten?"

"It's quite simple," said Gangutai, "How on earth can my grandson and I manage, graze, and look after ten goats? First of all, I don't have space; the shed behind our hut cannot accommodate so many! Will you also give me money to build a bigger shed? No! Then, when we take them out to graze, how can we herd them? I am too old to run after the strays, and my grandson will have to skip school to help me. At least half the goats will run away or be stolen by nearby farmers."

Kotnis was much struck by Gangutai's sound argument. "But then," he said to her, "help me understand why you want four? Not three, or five, or seven?"

"Well, if there are four, I can keep them in my existing shed. I can take them out to graze along with my grandson when he returns from school. We can easily manage two goats each. We can find enough fodder. And even then, if one runs away, I will still have three healthy fat goats to sell in the market at a good price. And then buy four more!"

Kotnis ruefully nodded his head, impressed by this compelling logic. Returning to the headquarters, he summoned the entire program team and shared Gangutai's story. Kotnis was able to convince them that from now on, the scheme should only offer as many animals as the beneficiary was able to care for, and to determine this number by asking the right questions — the questions Gangutai had helped him identify.

Give Back My Folded Legs

Rukkabai lived in a large village in rural Maharashtra, close to the megapolis of Mumbai. After two sons, she gave birth to a daughter. The midwife who delivered her was awestruck: the baby did not have the usual kind of body. Her legs were wrinkled and shriveled, and emerged folded, in a sitting pose. Most amazing of all, her hands were folded in front of her as though in prayer. The midwife immediately pronounced her a divine child, blessed by the gods. They named her Devaki, the divine one.

Although they were poor and could have wished for a child who could do housework and wage work in the rice fields, the whole family felt Devaki would bring them honor and good fortune. So even though they knew she would never be able to walk, Devaki was carefully tended to. Neighbors and people from surrounding villages would come to seek blessings from the little girl, and she grew up with much pride in her special body and her capacity to give people a sense of hope.

As she grew older, Devaki was provided with a specially crafted wheeled plank on which she could move about the house and help her mother with daily chores. She convinced the family to let her set up a small stall in front of the house, from where she ran a successful business selling tea and snacks. She proved that even from her seated position, she could contribute to the family's income. She never lacked customers and would perform a quick ritual of blessing on everything she served them. They came not only because of the blessing, but because she always had a happy smile and kind words for them.

Across the bay, in the great city of Mumbai, was a specialized hospital for reconstructive surgery and physical rehabilitation. It was highly reputed, and had provided prosthetic limbs, physiotherapy, and corrective surgery for thousands of people with various physical disabilities. The director of the hospital decided, though, that it was not enough to serve the people of the city, or those who could afford to come there. He decided to launch an outreach program in the surrounding rural areas. A mobile team would locate people — especially from poor families — with operable or otherwise rectifiable disabilities and bring them to the hospital for treatment. The director found funding for his initiative, so the whole process would be free.

Devaki was in her early thirties when the rehab team arrived in her village. While they were impressed with her mobility and her status in the village as a person with special powers, they were convinced that she was an excellent candidate for corrective surgery. They worked hard to motivate the family to allow Devaki to undergo surgery.

"We can operate on her and provide her with prosthetics. She will be able to walk! She will no longer need to wheel herself around on that plank," the young doctor said with enthusiasm. "Her whole life will change. She will feel like a normal person!"

The family was skeptical at first. "But she is absolutely fine — and she is a special person! She was blessed by the Goddess at birth. We don't want to put her through trouble and pain, even if you say it is all free," said Rukkabai.

Devaki protested most strongly. "I **am** a normal person!" she said angrily, "Who are you to say I am not? I do everything that others do — I cook, I do the household chores, I run the tea stall and earn money for the family. I don't need an operation. I don't need to stand up or walk to be happy!"

The young doctor was flustered but determined to bring her around. "But you could not marry because of this deformity. And there is so much more you could do if you were able to walk. You could travel, visit the great temples of the Goddess. You could bring your special gift of blessing to many people who cannot come to your village!"

And so it was that after multiple visits to their home and repeated entreaties, the young doctor and his team wore down the family and convinced them to let Devaki undergo the surgery. Devaki and her parents were taken by ambulance to the hospital in Mumbai, where she was assessed by a team of senior surgeons. They assured them that she was an excellent candidate for corrective surgery, and that she would be walking, with the help of calipers, in a matter of weeks. Devaki didn't really believe them but felt helpless in the face of her parents' hope and faith in the big-city doctors.

The results of the surgery were, sadly, far from what was expected. Even after weeks of physiotherapy, Devaki could not stand or walk without support, despite the prosthetics on her legs. Worst of all, she could no longer bend her knees or sit, let alone

with her legs crossed. She had to be assisted to move down to the floor and could only sit with her legs stiffly splayed in front of her. Her protests and those of her family were brushed aside, with insincere assurances that she would gradually improve and regain her mobility. The young doctor who motivated them was nowhere to be seen after a few initial visits, especially after he realized that the surgery had not achieved the results he had promised. The specialist surgeons who operated on her no longer had time for her complaints, having moved on to other patients.

After two months in the Mumbai hospital, Devaki's father arrived to take her and her mother home. They returned to the village with heavy hearts, knowing that Devaki was now seriously impaired, and would need constant help to stand, walk, sit down, bathe or even relieve herself. She might never be able to reopen her little tea stall.

Devaki was devastated as the implications of her new reality sank in. She had now become a major burden on her family, and had completely lost her mobility, her control over her body and her day-to-day life. One day, she lay propped up against the external wall of the house where her beloved tea stall once was. She began to sob uncontrollably. She looked up at the sky and cried out to the Goddess:

"Oh Devi, my beloved Shakti! You blessed me at birth, and now you have punished me for my arrogance, for allowing those doctors to try to fix something that wasn't broken. Now I am weighing down my entire family. People look on me with pity, not respect. Forgive me! I beseech you, please give back my wrinkled, folded legs. Give back the freedom I once had!"

LOVE AND
Solidarity

But My Neighbor Is Fasting!

The year was 1985 and the location was Bombay (now Mumbai). A handful of us had quit our jobs, founded an NGO called SPARC, and decided to work with the women living in the pavement dwellings that covered huge swathes of the city's streets.

We were much clearer about what we didn't want to do than what we did want to do. We did not want to offer women services, welfare, 'education', health programs, or simplistic solutions to their incredibly complex meshwork of problems. We did want to bring women together, to create a time and space for them to analyse their situation in new ways, decide what they wanted to change, and support them in any way that we could. Paolo Freire, the radical Brazilian priest whose 'liberation pedagogy' inspired our thinking, called this approach 'conscientisation'.

We began to pound the pavements: going street by street, from one tiny 8X8 or 10X10 pavement hut to another, trying to establish contact with the women, get them to talk to us, explain what we wanted to do, what we could not do ("get us proper houses!"), and dealing with their well-founded distrust of our motives.

It was an insufferably hot and humid day in April 1985, and the holy month of Ramadan (Ramzan in India) had begun. A number of the pavement dwellers in this particular part of the city were Muslims who had originally migrated from impoverished rural areas across the country, living side by side with many Dalit and neo-Buddhist families. The Dalits are the groups of people and castes who were once considered "untouchable" and harshly stigmatized and excluded by mainstream Hindu society. They embraced the term Dalit, which means "oppressed", and many of them had converted to Buddhism in resistance to the caste system.

That day, as I wound my way through the pavement huts on Reay Road bridge, I asked permission to enter Jijabai's tiny hut. I had visited before, at around the same time — in the afternoon, when she would be back from her cleaning job in the neighboring building and preparing a meal for her children. This day, however, the Primus stove was unlit and there was no sign of any cooking. So I asked her, casually, why no meal was being prepared. She replied, just as casually: "Because it is Ramzan."

"But you are not Muslim?" I said, puzzled.

"No, but my neighbor is fasting. They are Muslim. In fact, my neighbors on both sides of this hut are Muslim. How can I cook and torture them with the smell of food when they are fasting from dawn to dusk? That would not be right."

"So what will your children eat when they come home from school?" I asked, not knowing what else to say.

"They will eat last night's rotis (flat bread). I will cook tonight, when my neighbors break their fast."

"Did they ask you to do this? Not cook till the evening?"

"Of course not!" She said scornfully, "They would not be so shameless! Nor would I be so unfeeling as to cook before they break their fast!"

I was stunned into silence and humbled by her nonchalant attitude towards a sacrifice I could probably never make. Jijabai had never gone to school or learned to read or write. She had worked as an agricultural laborer in her village since she was six or seven years old. She was not, by any usual measure, a remarkable woman. And yet, in that moment, her clarity elevated her to a moral plane that few of us reach.

Jijabai and her neighbors had almost nothing in material terms: four bamboo poles, canvas, and plastic sheets constituted their homes. They earned enough to fill their stomachs, but not enough to secure more permanent housing or put anything away for the future. Theirs was a long history of discrimination, and sectarian and caste-based violence. The city authorities and more fortunate citizens shunned them as riffraff defiling the city's streets, who should be cleared away like trash.

Is this why they felt they could only depend on each other – on others as marginalized as they, even if they were from different locations or practiced different faiths? Or that they could only rely on each other's goodwill and support for survival? We may never fully understand Jijabai's simple yet profound act of solidarity, but perhaps it arose from this sense of connectedness: a deeply decent human being caring

for others around her. Hers was a humanity that went beyond identities, origins, gods and social divides.

I know that I, for one, learned from Jijabai what it means to be extraordinary. She and others like her are guardians of a great legacy: a place without state, regimes or leaders, an eternal land that cannot be destroyed.

Apologize!

I write this story on the thirtieth anniversary of the Beijing Conference. The Fourth World Conference on Women, held in Beijing in September,1995, was a historic event for the global women's movement, the culmination of decades of relentless advocacy with governments, legal systems, and communities in the world's first multilateral agreement for advancing gender equality: The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action.

While 189 countries are signatories to the Declaration, very few have implemented the recommended actions sincerely. But at the time, it was a huge achievement. While the government delegations met in Beijing, over 30,000 women rights activists met, debated, learned about each other's work, and joyously celebrated this incredible con-vergence in the suburb of Huairou, where the NGO conference was held. It was the largest ever convening of women activists from every part of the world. Huairou was a remarkable space, where the power of transnational feminism seemed to vibrate in every corner. But given the violent and traumatic experiences that many women had shared, all was not jubilation. Indeed, my most lasting and powerful memory of Huairou came from an unexpected everyday event that took place next to the building where some of us were housed.

On the very first morning after our arrival, at around 7:30 AM, my roommate and I were woken by the sound of a single, resounding drumbeat. DhumM! DhumM! DhumM! It was such a powerful sound that we could feel it in our gut. Intrigued, we rushed out to see where the sound was coming from, and what it was about.

We were mesmerized by the sight that met us: two long processions of women approached each other from either end of the street. On one side was a column of about two hundred Korean women, in traditional dress, marching in slow, measured steps. We were surprised to see a group in their 60s and 70s at the head of the procession. They carried a large banner with one word emblazoned on it: "Apologize!" Behind them were two young women bearing large kettle drums, striking the doleful beat that had woken us from our sleep.

Someone in the crowd whispered that they were Korean "comfort women": women who had been forced into brothels by the Japanese army during their 35-year occupation of Korea. Herstory now tells us that in the countries occupied by Japan during the Second World War, hundreds of thousands of women and girls had been forced into sexual slavery — the largest number from Korea. They were physically abused and emotionally traumatized. Even after the end of the war and Japan's defeat, right up to the early 1990s, successive Japanese governments had denied the existence of these brothels and refused to apologize to the survivors or offer reparations. This is why the marching Korean women wore masks, to symbolize how they had been silenced, ignored and forgotten for decades. In fact, one of the first official apologies was rendered just a few weeks before the Beijing Conference, by the then Japanese Prime Minister. It was the first official acknowledgement and apology to Korea and to the comfort women.

From the opposite direction marched a group of about a hundred Japanese women, also in traditional dress. They too were of all ages but led by a handful of women in their 60s and 70s. They too walked at a measured pace as they approached the Korean women. They wore no masks, but their heads were slightly bent, eyes downcast, their hands held in front. They, too, carried a banner, with two words: "We Apologize".

When the two groups were within a few feet of each other, they stopped. At some invisible signal, the Japanese women bowed deeply to the Korean women and said in unison: "We Apologize." The Korean women bowed in acknowledgement. The tears flowed on both sides. Each column then turned around and marched back.

Throughout this incredible encounter, a profound stillness fell over the gathered crowd. It became a moment of deep collective reflection and disturbance in our hearts. Emotions and thoughts surged.

The scene echoed far beyond Huairou, beyond that moment, back to the injustices of the past, but also to the possibilities of the future. We suddenly understood that it was a powerful enactment of feminism: women taking responsibility for the violence of their own country, expressing contrition and solidarity. Through this ritual, the two groups attempted to bridge generations of grief and denial and sow the seeds of healing.


APOLOGIZE

Through the rest of the conference, that drumbeat became our daily wakeup call. For all the years after, at least for me, it remained an enduring symbol of the power of feminist values and practice. It was no longer just a sound; it was a resonant reminder of the other thousands of suppressed stories, the courage to confront them, and for bearing responsibility when the perpetrators do not. It portrayed our infinite capacity for love and healing, and the transformative power of feminist solidarity across time, cultures and borders.

Walk Beside Us

As a committed practitioner of the feminist liberation pedagogy[1] for over a decade, I had developed a fairly good understanding of how to mobilize the most marginalized women into collectives by the early 1990s. The collectives had become safe spaces in which women could raise issues that lay at the core of their struggles but were rarely discussed in their daily lives. I had seen, again and again, how quickly this process shifted their consciousness, and how rapidly the rigid ideologies underlying caste, class, religion, and gender norms that had controlled women's voice, behaviour, mobility and aspirations for centuries, had crumbled.

It was not the "slow" approach that it was widely believed to be, because though it indeed began slowly, once that space became the women's own, the pace accelerated at breathtaking speed. The power of the collective, of collective action, became intoxicating, and the women were ready to bear any cost to confront the injustices of centuries. This was especially true for Dalit and indigenous women, when they glimpsed new ways of tackling the inaccessibility of basic resources like water, cooking fuel and forest products, the persistence of caste- and gender-based violence against them and their families, and the biases of state officials, public service providers and elected representatives, which denied them the benefits of many development schemes.

But the greatest impact of the process was the way it enabled women's deepest wisdom and insights to emerge, and the immense confidence with which they were able to articulate these even to those occupying positions of power.

This is exactly what happened in the Mahila Samakhya program for women's empowerment in Karnataka, launched in 1989. By the end of the second year, and even earlier in many places, Dalit and indigenous women had formed stable collectives and started to challenge centuries-old forms of exclusion, injustice, and social bias. The movement progressed at a pace that even we, the activists who had helped build it, were barely able to keep up with.

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[1] Also known as feminist popular education. For more info, see https://justassociates.org/big-ideas/feminist-popular-education1/

But this very dynamic raised tricky questions for some of us activists at the helm of the program about our own role and location in the process. If the women were moving ahead at such a speed, and with such assurance and clarity, what need did they have for us? Should we bow out and move on to other areas, organize other marginalized women? The more we discussed our dilemma, the clearer it became that we wouldn't find the answer amongst ourselves — we would have to talk to the women's collectives. The insights that emerged through our discussions were astonishing in their clarity and taught us much about the role of external activists in the movement-building process. The discussion began when we asked the simple question: "What is *our* role in your movement when *you* have become so strong and can take the lead?"

The women contemplated the matter with great seriousness — they had not considered this question before. Eventually, though, their advice poured forth in a cascade. Here is what they said, paraphrased from their own words:

First, wise old Balavva, one of the first women to form the collective in her area, said: "Work with us, not for us. We are not 'victims,' or your 'beneficiaries' or 'target groups'– we are the most important actors in the struggle for change, because we have the most to gain or lose." The others nodded wisely. "And although we are women, remember that we want to tackle all forms of inequality, not just gender inequality. What use is gender equality to us if the other forms of injustice and oppression remain in place?" There were loud murmurs of agreement. While I had intuitively known the first part of Balavva's response, the second nudged me closer to grasping the importance of intersectionality in how we approached gender discrimination.

Renukamma then chimed in. "Don't treat us like children or ignorant villagers just because we are poor or illiterate. We have a different kind of knowledge that is most valuable to our movements. You are anxious to change our situation but sometimes, you want to decide what our priorities for change should be. But our reality and experience is different from yours, and you must remember that while you will go home when your day's work is done, we must bear the costs of the struggle for change in our lives, our homes, every single day." This gave me pause, because while we always respected women's knowledge, we somehow assumed that

we always followed women's priorities, not our own. Renukamma's words subtly challenged this assumption.

Gowravva elaborated: "When you help us get organized and change our way of thinking, you may be disappointed when we want to deal first with issues of poverty, wages, water, and caste violence, rather than wife-beating or sexual violence. Don't worry, we'll deal with those issues too – but you cannot set the agenda for us and still claim it is our space and our movement." In other words, all the above are "women's issues", not just violence.

Young Chikkamma asserted: "You often encourage us to use the law to fight for our rights. But the law is very remote for us, and very expensive to use – if we have to go even to the nearest police station or legal aid center, we lose days of wages and spend on bus fare and food costs, so many things we cannot afford. The strong new laws that women like you have fought for are important, of course, but they will not give us a few buckets of drinkable water, or a decent wage for a day's work in the fields, or kerosene for our lamps and stoves, or a decent meal every day, or even change the biases of the customary laws and traditions that govern our lives. We know the new laws are important, but you must support us to make these other changes in our own communities." This placed feminist legal reform in a new light and pushed us to recognize the high opportunity cost of accessing the legal system for poor women.

The clever and always provocative Seera, a Lambani[2] woman, then shocked us by asking: "You speak of the importance of gender equality and women's rights in our communities. But have you cleansed your own homes and organizations of discrimination against women and girls? We hear stories about how women are harassed and molested in local NGOs, or the issues faced at home even by your activists who work with us. We need good models of leadership and ensuring women's rights – if your organisations and leaders don't provide these, who will?" Her words made me dwell on the extensive gender discrimination even in supposedly progressive civil society organizations, a matter that was not discussed openly at that time.

[2] The Lambanis, or Banjaras, are a nomadic tribe from Rajasthan who are believed to have migrated to southern India in the wake of the Mughal armies

Balavva then came back with this insightful guideline: "Share your knowledge and skills and connections to help us envision more just economic and social systems. You cannot eradicate our poverty in terms of income – we have been dealing with poverty for generations and understand what keeps it in place. But do expose us to new strategies, maybe things that poor women have done successfully in other places, other countries. Be our listening posts to inform us of what's going on with the government of this country and in the world." There was quiet reflection all around.

Finally, the indomitable Sundaramma said: "You cannot do much for us economically, but you can help us eradicate the poverty of our ideas and dreams. You can help us find new ways of analyzing the world, of organizing ourselves to make a greater impact, and of learning the words with which to voice our dreams and visions. Don't compete with us when we grow, become organized and learn to raise our voices. Don't speak for us but help us be heard by those who don't listen to us."

Sundaramma's final words have remained with me throughout my life, and could be the touchstone for all those of us who seek to build movements:

"When we find the path we wish to tread, first, walk in front of us. Then, when we are stronger, walk beside us. And finally, when we are truly strong, walk behind us, so that if we should stumble and fall, you will be there to help us get up and walk again."

"But why, respected Sundaramma, do you need us to keep walking behind you when you have grown strong and are leading the way?" I asked.

"Because, dear sister, there will be many people, many forces, who do not wish to see us move forward. They will be waiting to knock us down and push us back. It is then that we need you behind us, to pick us up and help us regain our strength and determination. That's why you must walk behind us!"

A Handful of Raisins

The popular education methodology has often been questioned and viewed with reservation by funding agencies, development "experts", and even civil society and NGO leaders. It is often considered too slow, lacking immediate impact, disruptive to families and communities (especially in women's empowerment interventions), and hard to measure in terms of "results". This story challenges and refutes those biases and demonstrates the power that marginalized women find when they are mobilized, aware and empowered to lead their own struggles for justice.

A small gathering of women's collective leaders was held in a town in northern Karnataka, where the Mahila Samakhya program for women's empowerment had been active for three years. Over two days, we camped under simple canopies and held intense discussions with the thirty-odd Dalit and indigenous women who had gathered there.

They shared their triumphs and tribulations. One group described their great victory in ending the centuries-old custom of ritual begging for their wages[1]. Others reported how they had reduced teacher absenteeism in their children's schools by maintaining their own attendance records and reporting errant teachers to the district education officer. Another group shared their sorrow about how upper-caste landlords continued to harass them after they started challenging the caste discrimination they faced while trying to get water from the village well, purchase tea from a roadside café, or even buy a comb. The customary law forbade Dalit women from combing their hair – a codified norm to prevent them from attracting the attention of upper-caste men! The women had begun writing about these unjust practices in their neo-literacy journal *Speak! Listen!*, which had drawn the ire of the local elites.

Late in the evening, I went for a solitary walk and sat on a rock, contemplating the setting sun and the issues, analyses and strategies I had heard that day. I closed my eyes and took in the beautiful truth: whatever our team had done over the past three years, it was working. Women had discovered their own power to make change, and were doing just that, in small steps and giant leaps. They had awakened their latent courage, their innate

[1] The struggle described in the story "Why Beg for Our Wages?" in this volume

sense of justice, and their determination that their daughters and granddaughters would live in a reality different from their own.

Suddenly I felt a gentle tap on my shoulder. I looked up and saw Balavva, her wrinkled face, her body stooped from a lifetime of hard labour and little food, but her eyes twinkling and filled with love,.

“Am I disturbing you, daughter?” she asked with a smile.

“No, not at all. Is there something you wanted to tell me?” I asked. “No, there is something I want to give you!” she said.

She lifted the corner of her saree that hung over her shoulder. I noticed that it was knotted around something. Carefully, she opened the knot and took out a handful of raisins.

“I brought these for you,” she said, “from the vineyard where I work every day. I secretly put aside a bunch of the raisins when they had dried, to bring for you.”

“How kind and thoughtful of you, Balavva! Thank you so much!” But maybe my words sounded formulaic, so Balavva sat next to me and explained the meaning of her gift.

“No, it is we who must thank you. I am a poor woman, and all I can give you are these raisins, but you and your team have given us something more precious than gold! We have grown in confidence, we have grown in knowledge, we have grown in the strength to change our lives and rid ourselves of centuries of oppression. Each of these things is like a precious gem — and no one can take them away from us.

“So, forgive me for bringing you only these poor raisins. Remember, in my heart, each raisin is like a pearl or a diamond. It is filled with love, blessings and strength so that you may go and do this work with thousands of other poor women like me!”

My eyes welled up. I took Balavva’s hands and placed them on my head, seeking her blessings, and then bowed to her, my hands folded in humility. I knew I would never forget this moment. This handful of raisins was the most precious gift I would ever receive in my entire life.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS & Gratitude

When I first wrote these stories, each one ended with a salutation — a gesture honoring and thanking the women in the story, wherever they may be, for what I learnt from them. When the stories were reviewed by a few objective readers, they felt this became somewhat repetitive, and could perhaps be put into a concluding section. They also felt that since the salutations contained a summary of my own learning, it might forestall the reader's own reflections or insights. So, in this concluding chapter, I present both my respect and gratitude to the multitude of women that I was fortunate enough to learn from, as well as the essence of the wisdom I gained from them.

From Jijabai, Champa, Lakshmi, the sangha women of Bidar, Bijapur and Mysore Mahila Samakhya, the many women of Mahila Milan in Mumbai, the Korean and Japanese women marchers at the Beijing conference, I learnt what it means to be extraordinary. In the process, every single woman and collective in these stories showed me the difference between formal education and intelligence, between classroom learning and the wisdom gained through lived experiences. They also taught me to question how we activists determine what knowledge is "relevant" and "useful" to marginalized women, as the women of the Mahila Samakhya collectives demonstrated their insatiable thirst for seeing and knowing beyond their boundaries, and their capacity to traverse the local and global with such aplomb!

Thanks to Khodeja, Madina, Mehrunissa, Sagira, Sakina, Lakshmi, Rafiq, and the many other wise women and men of the pavement-dwellers movement, I gained a different perspective on what women's issues are, on the stark difference in the lived realities of poor women and men, and I was humbled into understanding why you can't always walk in a straight line. You taught us to rethink our approach as feminist popular educators, and why we had to show you the hundred saree shop. So yes, you and your hundreds of sisters and brothers got proper houses – but not as handouts from us middle-class activists or a benign government, but because of your own collective strength, persistence and struggle.

Profound apologies to Devaki and Rukkabai and your family, for the damage that we allowed a medical institution to commit on Devaki's body in the name of "rehabilitation," and worse, for our poor, naive understanding of "disability". You were not disabled, and then you were. We don't deserve your forgiveness.

The Dalit women of Tegampura, Rajasthan, and Bihar – you all illuminated the meaning of courage and transformation, of intersectional feminist strategies, of the power of converting symbols of subordination into weapons that challenged age-old caste and gender injustice. Sundaramma, Balavva, Gangamma, and the hundreds of you who came to the Mahila Samakhya knowledge fair, my deep gratitude for showing us what no one can steal from you.

I bow in deep respect to the Korean women at the Beijing Conference who enacted the powerful ritual of both demanding acknowledgement of the atrocities committed upon you, and to the Japanese women who demonstrated the power of feminist solidarity by freely giving you the recognition and apology you deserved.

My salutations to you, Rukkamma, your every third seed showed us the power of feminist subversion. As did you, Gangutai, whose very logical demand for just four goats challenged and changed the design of an entire government program. Just as Chennamma did by questioning us researchers and sharing an insight that transformed an entire research study.

Thank you, Nasra, for sharing with me the power and wisdom of the Roma worldview — a world without borders, nations or narrow territorial loyalties, and therefore, without war. And my gratitude to the Roma people everywhere, who have never taken up arms in the name of ruler, religion, or country, and who believe that "the road is good" and the whole world is theirs.

Thank you, Balavva, for the most precious gift I have ever received — a handful of raisins, and the love and gratitude you so generously gave in return for helping you gain what was always your right.

My thanks go out to our external reviewers, Aruna Rao, Alexa Bradley, and Gayatri Menon, for their extremely helpful comments and suggestions, and to my CREA colleagues Amulya Gopalakrishnan and Nayantara Patel for their painstaking editing of the stories. Renee Kaur and the Daalcheeni team have illustrated the stories with deep feeling, and I am grateful to Renee for taking on the design of this collection. Above all, I am deeply and immensely indebted to CREA for ensuring that these stories were launched and made available to an audience I could never have reached without their support.

I apologize if these stories could not entirely capture the power of the moments, the experiences, the insights they attempt to narrate. Regardless of their inadequacies, I want all of the women in these stories to know that the learning did not end with me. Each of your stories has helped hundreds of young feminist activists around the world not only to demystify and grasp complex theories and concepts, but has left them inspired, humbled, even awestruck. Best of all, they helped transform their mindsets and strategies. I hope the readers of these stories will find them equally moving and momentous.

About the Author

Srilatha Batliwala is an India-based feminist activist, researcher, scholar and trainer with over fifty years of experience. She is currently **Senior Advisor, Knowledge Building, CREA**, as well as a **Senior Associate with Gender at Work**. For over two decades, her work focused on grassroots movement building with marginalized urban and rural women in India, as well as research and policy advocacy on gender equality and women's rights. She then moved on to work internationally, at the Ford Foundation, Harvard University and AWID, doing grant-making, scholarly work, building theory from practice, and capacity building of young women activists around the world. She is best known for bridging the worlds of theory and practice, and her concept papers and primers on power, women's empowerment, women's movements and feminist leadership — many published by CREA — are widely cited and used by both academics and activists worldwide.

Srilatha enjoys her current role as a feminist grandmother — both in the women's movement, and to her four teenage grandchildren.

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