

Kalyani Menon-Sen

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(Transcript)

The feminist Group JAGORI, New Delhi

JAGORI became active about 20 years ago around the issue of dowry-murders. They witnessed an increase in mysterious lethal „accidents“ of young women. They rallied against „...the way in which it was covered up. The way in which whether the police or the administration or legal experts refused to recognize that there was anything special about this. And it was the usual arguments: That this was something that was happening within the home, something that is personal, it has to do with marriage and this is not something the state or the legal system can engage with. And it was really – I think the arguments used and the nature of the struggle and the demonstrations and so on are the same that feminists have used against violence in many countries, but basically the whole thrust was to pull the issue of violence out of this hidden spot, put it out on the streets and ask people to react from their conscience (..?) And I think theorizing from this struggle, and really theorizing violence as an element of patriarchy, as a constitutive element of patriarchy without which patriarchy cannot exist...this is what really set the framework for JAGORI's work and is really a thread that runs through our work these twenty years and we still see struggles against violence as a very essential element of our contribution to the women's movement. We are now a fairly large organisation, we started with seven people, we have 32 people now (*i.e. working for the organization, ah*), and we work in a variety of issues and themes. We do a lot of training for grassroots women's groups. Training on feminist organizing and collective action on issues. But we also do training for people from government development programmes, people from development agencies, teachers, college students on issues of women's rights. We do research on issues of women's rights and the research is linked back into producing materials for public advocacy. Mostly in Hindi, because we work in the northern states in India where Hindi is the spoken language. And on producing materials that can be used in campaigns. And we are involved in several campaigns, the dowry-campaign certainly, also the campaign against injectible contraceptives, the anti-globalization-campaign, and more recently the campaign for the right to food. So, that's a brief background of our work.

New conceptual framework to understand violence

What I'd like to speak about today is really - in the last five years – the way the women's movement in India – and I use JAGORI as an example because we work as part of a network of autonomous women's groups, in fact there are about 30 organizations linked together, working in different parts – but what has happened is: In the last five years we have really been forced to re-look at violence and re-look at our own theorizing about violence. Because

the nature, the forms of violence and the ways it is played out in women's lives has changed very radically. If I were to summarize it and try to put it in a kind of conceptual framework: We are beginning to see it as a triangle. And the three arms of the triangle are neo liberal globalization, religious fundamentalism and the militarization of our society. The legitimization of violence through militarization, let's say. And.... it's seems to us now that women's lives are lived within the three arms of this triangle, which reinforce each other and which are actually creating a situation where violence is far more visible, violence is seen as legitimate, it is seen as a legitimate means of subordinating women, certainly, as it has always been seen, but it is also seen as a legitimate means of assertion of identity, of political strategizing – there's a huge legitimization of violence – and we are also seeing violence being played out through economic instruments, through political instruments in ways that we really did not recognize before.

The example of migrant women workers in India: The economic arm of the triangle

And I'd like to talk a little bit about some work that we are engaged in right now with migrant women workers in the informal sector. This group of women would be – I think - the most marginalized group, if one were to look at the situation in the city of Delhi, it's migrant women and women workers in the informal sector who would be right at the bottom of the pile, whether we are looking at the economic hierarchy or the social hierarchy, the cultural hierarchy, whatever, this is the most subordinated group.

In working with them, it seems to us that their lives are really a good sort of lense to understand how these three processes of globalization, militarization and fundamentalism are interacting. We were just talking at dinner, before we came in here, and it is very strange to see that these processes that shape, that constrain the lives of migrants are very similar whether it is migrants from country to country – like the migrant workers who are working here from Sri Lanka – or migrants within the country, as it happens in India where there is a huge flow of people from rural areas where agriculture – onw can't even say is stagnating, it has stagnated. We have a huge crisis in agriculture. We have very little investment in agriculture. We had ecological crisis. So there is a huge flow of people from drought-hit or famine-hit states into big cities like Delhi. And particularly Delhi, because Delhi is surrounded by states which have been in crisis for some time. We have migrants from Gujarat, we have migrants from Rajasthan, we even have migrants from the eastern states of Bihar and Orissa and the Northeast. Now economically its very easy to seeand (...?...) – one really doesn't have to go into details of how neo-liberal globalization is affecting the lives of these women. Women migrants who come into Delhi are working in three or four sectors, very cleary. The first of course, the hugest the most (...?...) sector is domestic work. We have organized chains of trafficking which most people don't identify with trafficking because these are not chains directly linked to sexwork. This is labour trafficking of young women and girls to work as domestic servants in Delhi. And this huge increase in bringing in domestic

servants from outside is linked in strange ways with the way the economy of Delhi has developed.

For one thing, working class women living in the city who earlier depended hugely on domestic work have been pushed to the geographical boundaries of Delhi, because the colonies in which they lived, when they came in, have now been taken over by urban developers. And it's interesting because these inhabitants of New Delhi, let's say, who have been domestic workers in the middle class families for years and years, they originally came in also as construction workers. From poorer states. So they come in as a gang of contract labour to work on construction. They live in a temporary kind of a camp in the area where housing development is coming up. When the construction is over, many of these women... kind of their temporary colony has slowly become more and more permanent. Naturally. Because it takes maybe a year to construct a huge development like that, so these women are a pool of labour in that place, which is accessible to middle class housewives who offer them jobs. So in the middle of a developed, fairly affluent middle class or upper class colony – in the middle of it or near it, you would find informal worker settlements which people usually call slums. I mean these are completely informal, they are organically grown as people have stayed and as they met their needs.... there are absolutely no urban services, no electricity, these things are stolen – so to speak – taken from the city infrastructure, but these women are available, they're living in the vicinity, so they can come and do the housework and go back. So it's very convenient. And because they have been construction workers, which is a sector where the wages are really miserable, housework or working in somebodies house seems like a better option. At least in the beginning. It is lighter work, you are in somebodies house you are not out in the sun, and sometimes there is along with the salary or the wage there is some food and so on. So even though the conditions of work are extremely exploitative, the wages are far below minimum wage, but there's a kind of... I mean, if you're employer is a nice person, or a sympathetic woman, she might help you out with some clothes, help you out with some food, so a different kind of relationship develops.

What has been happening in the last ten years – very clearly because of the way in which our entire economy has changed to bring in a lot of foreign companies – land prices in Delhi and the housing market in Delhi has just boomed. So every piece of urban land has become like gold. So there is no way in which these informal settlements of working class people can be allowed to exist. If you look at the legality: This land does not belong to the people who live there. Theoretically it belongs to the city. Or it belongs to some person from whom the housing colony originally bought its land. But what is now happening is that this land is now being sold to developers to put up luxury apartments for people who come in with MNCs and who look for a different standard in housing. So we have Swiss companies and Swedish companies, American companies moving in and moving in their own executives who are looking for a life-style that they would get in their own countries. Now to put up that sort of housing the land is sold to developers, and the developers use any possible method to get rid of the people who are living there. So in the last five years we had – just like those

unexplained dowry murders – every month there are three fires in some unauthorized colony all together. Or there will be an explosion in some place where gas cylinders are stored. Or there will be some kind of rush of people barging into houses and breaking them up. So by some means or another, there is a huge amount of violence being used by these developers in order to get rid of these people. And because they have a legal right to this land which they have bought there is no way that the police or the government will respond to the workers who live there, who say we are being attacked, our houses are being burnt, we are being thrown out or we are being arrested by the police, or whatever. They are completely helpless and without rights.

So what has happened is that these colonies – let's say of captive domestic labour – we're only looking at the domestic work, these colonies are also very deeply involved with the informal sector – what has happened to middle class households is: Their housemaids who used to live very close to their houses, have moved out of Delhi and are living quite far away now. And Delhi is a very big, sprawling city. So it's not possible for your old housemaid to travel forty or fifty kilometers and work in your house. So suddenly the middle-class housewife finds herself without domestic help. This has created a huge market for servants or young girls who will come and live right in the house and work for you without expecting any more than the most basic facilities. So this is not the kind of live-in domestic worker who would have a room of her own or who would expect some degree of independence, a weekend off or any of that. These are 14, 15, 16 years old girls, very often completely uneducated, who come from the tribal regions of India, to the east of the country. Who don't speak the language. They only speak their own language, they perhaps don't even know Hindi. They don't know anybody in Delhi. So they are precisely in the situation in which a Filipina migrant or a Sri Lankan migrant or a Malaysian migrant would be in a European country. They're completely helpless and they are completely dependent on the person who trafficks them in. So suddenly there is this huge domestic work force of very young, very helpless girls. And the system that is set up by these traffickers that bring them in – they call themselves employment agencies – none of them are registered, they're all sort of in the grey economy. They collect the salary and they say that they are sending the money back to the family. Now – actually they buy the girls of the family in the sense that they give them a lump-sum of money and the family doesn't see the money after that. And of course these girls are subject not only to exploitative work but also to sexual abuse and sexual exploitation. And very often – if they try and run away from the household where they are, they might very well end up in the most exploitative sector of sex work. I mean, in doing sex work but without any autonomy at all.

So what has happened is that the economic exploitation of these girls – which is something which is familiar in our countries, maybe in any country which uses this kind of labour – has been hugely accentuated by the macroeconomic scenario. By the fact that the kinds of jobs that you are likely to get other than housework are in the informal sector, are in these contract-production chains – so the alternative to very badly paid and very exploitative housework is also shrinking. And then there's a very clear link to our macro-economic

policies. Because in India also the effort over the last ten years of our whole period of liberalisation has been to make labour more flexible, to dismantle protective legislation, to legitimize contract labour – you know all the things that the workers movement fought for have been, are being slowly dismantled so the work opportunities available to women are becoming actually extremely limited. So this whole thing of feminization of labour – you might see more women working so you might say that labour is feminized. But the quality of that work, the conditions of that labour are such, that domestic work seems like an attractive option. And that's an extremely strange, an extremely anomalous kind of situation. Where the most exploitative kind of work seems like a better choice than what else is available.

The example of migrant women workers in India: The arm of religious fundamentalism

Now the other arm of the triangle, religious fundamentalism arm also plays out in the lives of these women migrants. You know perhaps that India has huge problems with borders with all its neighbours. We have a border dispute with Pakistan, we have problems with Bangladesh, we have problems with Nepal. And from all these countries there have been large numbers of people who have traditionally come to work in India. It is the same kind of migration for economic opportunities. It's different kinds of work, it's some informal kind of work, some very specific profession, some amount of sex work, and so on. And over the years these groups have also been used by political parties who see that as a huge vote bank. So in practical terms what it means is that a group of let's say Bangladeshi migrants comes into India and have been here for twenty years, they are all coming together, they are all living together because they speaking their own language and they are doing the same kind of work, they're in one place. And it is possible for a political party to threaten this group with being ousted or with being expelled or being arrested and in that way make sure that they get votes from this group. So actually while they do not have citizenship papers, they don't have voter cards, they have been vote banks. (???????) And the traditional vote bank for the Bangladeshi migrants, the party which has protected these migrants and has used their votes has been the Congress. Now in the last five to ten years when we have seen the rise of Hindu fundamentalist politics in India and when we have seen the BJP which has come to power with a completely Hindu-centered agenda which is India for the Hindus and anybody who lives in India has to be a Hindu and so on.... These groups of Bangladeshi migrants who are all Muslims where a perfect target. Now what has happened is: The BJP has made deals with property developers and has sold the areas where Bangladeshi migrants were being living to developers. So this whole development that I have been describing of slums being destroyed and people being ousted, unauthorized colonies being destroyed. That has affected Bangladeshis far more. Traditionally Delhi.... I mean twenty years ago, 50% of the domestic workers were Bangladeshi housemaids. And these are the people who are actually being attacked. So on the one hand, there's this whole thing of them living in unauthorized colonies and so on. On the other hand, there's: „These muslims! They're not Indian, they're Bangladeshi! They've come in here, they've infiltrated into the country, they're taking away

opportunities“ There is this whole Xenophobia created around Bangladeshi. That makes them doubly victims. And it's been a huge focus of political action by Hindu-right parties to target areas where Bangladeshi migrants are living. Now the fact that they have been living there for twenty years and there are some legal provisions that allow them to claim citizenship in this country because ... before our independence Bangladesh was a part of India.... so it is possible if your parents were born.... were living in India before it was separated and all of that.... it is possible to claim citizenship. But because they are working in grey-sector-jobs and because it is so difficult for them to come out and claim that identity... they claim that they have always been in India and that makes them even more vulnerable. Because they are asked to show papers, when they are asked to prove that they are born in India they have nothing. Even though they could legally have gotten those papers.... they fear of being attacked, they fear of being exposed and losing their job.... that prevents them from getting those papers. And these are the women who really are the face of migrant women labour. So they are actually very much Indian women from the eastern part of India but because they happen to be Muslim and some part of their family went into Bangladesh or stayed there, that makes them even more vulnerable.

The example of migrant women workers in India: The arm of militarization

And the militarization part of it we see every day. The cause of these whole notion of the threat by Pakistan. At this point there is no political party in India, no matter how progressive, not even the left, not even the communist party, dares to say that this threat from Pakistan might be just a bogie, it might be unreal. Because our politics for the last fifty years, our nationalism for the last fifty years has been constructed around this idea of: We are not Pakistan. Or othering that other part of the country, of othering Bangladesh. So why India has never been conceived as a Hindu nation in the way that Pakistan has been conceived as a islamic nation – by this whole process of constructing nationality as being something different from the islamic nation it's just become a very, very central part of our political discourse. And it is not... and I mean no party is willing to take the risk of questioning this on a political platform. So our military budgets have gone up, this whole issue of terrorism and terrorist attacks and defence against terrorists and having to fight terrorists....this whole thing has become bigger and bigger and more visible. So we have in New Delhi in front of all the ministers houses, in front of the house of parliament, parliament offices, our main buisness areas we have police posts, we have armed para-military forces with sandbags and things who are there to defend us against this pakistani terrorists. Every now and then we have encounters and some muslims will be killed and very conveniently pakistani passports and diaries and telephone books will be found in their pockets. So over the years we have all become very used to seeing armed people on the streets. And we have become very used to accepting the use of armed force by the state in the name of protection, security and anti-terrorism. Much bevor 9-11, we have been seeing this in India and it has become so much of our reality that if anybody is picked up and being taken away as a terrorist – we've also got repressive lawy which are

crueller than the 9-11-laws, which allow police and para-military-forces to arrest people on suspicion of being terrorists, to hold them without trial and without producing them in the court for upto six months. And these are forms of militarisation which have infiltrated our lives so subtly that they have hugely increased the vulnerability of any group which the state might target. Or which the political party in power might target. So if you are Bengali-speaking, if you live in an informal settlement and if you do not have – let's say a voter identity card, if you do not have title to the shack in which you are living – you are liable to be dubbed an unauthorized immigrant, you are liable to be dubbed a potential terrorist, you are liable to be labelled part of the criminal underworld.

Summing up: The increase of public violence against women

And all of these things together have hugely increased the vulnerability of these women workers. And at the same time – as I said the way in which our economic restructuring and our effort to liberalize and open our economy and integrate with global markets has meant Within formal sector – I mean the numbers in the informal sector are increasing – within formal sectors whatever protective measures we have is being diluted. So we have recently had our supreme court endorsing a judgement of a state high court which says that workers do not have the right to strike when and as they feel like. So the court has arrogated to itself the responsibility of deciding whether the issue upon which the strike has been called is a genuine issue or not. And what the framework will be to decide whether it is a genuine issue or not, can well be imagined.

We've had decisions of the supreme court saying it's legitimate for an employer to fire a worker for sleeping on the job. So we are seeing now our legal system beginning to endorse a value framework which gives complete power into the hands of the employer – rather than any power into the hands of the workers. And once again it's women workers who have become hugely more vulnerable because of the loss of this judicial protection which they had earlier.

And look at the sectors where women workers are working: First of all domestic work which is completely outside of the ambit of labour legislation. Contract work in these global production chains where again it's very difficult to say who is the employer. You know there are four or five subcontractors between the company and the worker. And none of them would take on the responsibility of saying I'm the employer. And then there are all these informal sector employments as rag picking, waste recycling, sex work.... So they are all professions which are vulnerable also because there is a moral judgement attached to many of them. They are professions which are traditionally linked to certain castes. So for instance waste recycling is done by people at the bottom of the caste hierarchy, by the oppressed caste, which are traditionally the weakest in terms of protection, in terms of rights. And of course women. So all of these vulnerabilities in the last five or ten years in ways which make it even more difficult to talk about women's rights. And which makes it very, very difficult to address violence only looking at it through the lense of patriarchy. As we were before. So one cannot

look at violence, one cannot address violence simply by doing the kind of work which we were doing before, which was focussing on domestic violence. Which we still do. Because the violence that women are facing is not only violence because of the nature of their intimate relationships. And in some ways the violence that they are facing through economic processes, the violence they are facing through this whole restructuring of governance to make it more congruent with globalization.... in some ways men from these communities, men from these groups face the same kind of violence. But as expected and it's not a surprise to any feminist that it's the women and the women's bodies which are actually used to let's say „teach the lesson“ to an entire community of what is the behaviour expected of people. So public violence – sexual violence and physical violence – in public spaces: Whether in work-places, on the streets, in a factories, in public transports, in informal community forums, has shown a huge increase. And more and more our political discourse seems to be legitimizing this violence. Certainly on the side of the Hindu right and of the Hindu right parties. There are very clear statements of which the best example is what happened in Gujarat where huge numbers of muslims were massakered, it was litterally like a program against the muslim community where leave-lets, hand-bills, posters, political speaches said that this is the community of terrorists, this is the community which does not hold loyalty to India, which is acting as an agent of Pakistan: „Rape their women! Make sure that each of their women is forced to bear a hindu child! Kill their women!“ This was the message and it was in print, it was in public documents distributed, it was on loudspeakers.

It is like in every war, it is no different from Bosnia where they said put a serb child in the womb of every bosnian muslim woman, it is the same thing. And of course, in a deeple patriarchal and feudal society these women who managed to survive this kind of rape are also not really supported or welcomed by their community. They have to face value judgements and reactions by men in their own comunities because rape whether by another men in the course of a political program or whatever as far as most men are concerned rape is rape and this woman is now destroyed. Who's going to marry her, who's going to stay with her. So we even had instances where women have been killed by men in their own family, where women have been prevented from coming to the law or speaking about it by men in their own families. So really rape as an instrument of silencing is very much a public theme. Rape is also used – I'm going on about the property developers because that it something that is happeneing now in Delhi. So hired goons coming into a colony which they want to evict. And raping women and girls is a very accepted strategic method of eviction. And similiarly sexual exploitation at the workplace – it's never been something that has been unknown, it has always been there but what is new now is really the legitimization of that.

Two Indias

And there is a huge polarisation in our discourse and in our public postures which is really a lot of people talk about it: There are two Indias. There is India which lives in the cities, which speaks English, which goes out to a MacDonaldis and which sees Imax-Movies and wears

Jeans and watches MTV and all of that. That's India. And that India works in a multinational firm or in IT and is pretty well off.

And then there is parock (???) which is illiterate and the poor, you can't do anything with them, they're castred (???) and they're so backward and all of that. Increasingly there is a Philosophy, more and more publically expressed, which is: You can't do anything with these people. Let's move on.

And this is something that was very missing from our discourse. Good, bad, indifferent: India has always had a very socialist kind of public discourse, political discourse. And more and more now over the years, the other kind of thing, which is: If you haven't made it then there is something wrong with you. It's your problem if you haven't made it. Why should those who have made it take on the burden, invest economically in social services for those who haven't. So entire discussion around the population policy is very much in this vain: „What to hell, if they want to have six children, it's their problem.“ So either you force people to have fewer children or if you insist on having six children well, you look after them. Why should I pay taxes to put your children in school or to send your children to hospital when they're ill.

And interestingly a lot of feminist economists are now looking at our latest budget on this viewpoint. We had a huge restructuring of our taxregime which is very comfortable for the middle class because tax structures have been rationalized that there aren't so many slabs and so on and so forth, but the part that nobody is talking about is also that there is also a huge schrinking of public revenues. So where is the money going to come from for universal education? Where is the money going to come from for Health, for access to drinking water, to sanitation. For we are still a country which does not have hundred percent access to drinking water or even to toilets. And where is this money going to come from? The answer is very simple, it is to come from a Worldbank loan.

So our governemet is very confident in saying our investment in the social sector – I mean, we are not following the model of African countries or Latin American countries where economic restructuring has seen social spending decrease very sharply – they are saying: What is your problem? Our social sector spending is very much the same. But when you ask the question where is this money coming from, then that is a whole bundle of issues that come right in with it. We are at this point talking about introducing user fees in the health system, in the primary health system. We already have a two-track education system where there is a public education system which is very poor and very mediocre and a private education system which is extremely good, which competes at the global level. We're talking about user charges for drinking water, we already have restructuring of electricity and tariffs and so on. So there is a whole shift in what kind of support women of the poorest groups can expect in order to counter the violence the face even in surviving.

Which is the chasp (???) the women's movement in India finds itself against. We have an extremely well articulated framework to understand violence as an element of patriarchy, we are struggling now to broaden that framework and to understand the connections between

these other global processes and patriarchy. And doing this at the same time as making sure that the women who are the victims of this don't die. Before we finish our theoretical analysis. So we act on many of these issues at the same time as we struggle to theorize on them and maybe in a sense that's the strength of our movement in a sense it's also why we feel our hands are tied. You have to take immediate action, let's say, to prevent an eviction from happening, but at the same it's also important to produce a theoretical analysis of that which you can use to maybe try and get other movements to support what we're doing. It is difficult."

A: Thank you very much, Kalyani Menon-Sen, for this very enlightening talk.

(Clapping)

More details on evictions

First Question from the audience (....muffled....)

K: „.....the strategy of the goons hired by developers who go into these settlements first of all they go in and say that this land doesn't belong to you, how come you are staying here....this is all illegal and you better clear out. And you have been living here for years and you better move. In the case that there is even a small degree of organisation and there always is – you know – these are groups belonging to the same area and the same religion, so there is some kind of organisation. They are saying we have been living here for ten years, fifteen years, we've got rights so you go away.“

Further steps in the process:

- goons offer very small sums of money
- community refuses
- negotiation for the price goes on
- the violence starts: drunks come in at night, spray petrol and set houses on fire
- they come with arms, shooting
- If people don't move on: day-time attack, women and children are brutalized, raped, beaten up

Escalating cycle of violence. End: Whipe out the slum with the help of police. Developer has filed a case. Bulldozers. Resisters are arrested. Arrested women are very vulnerable.

Not only in Delhi. Most recent round: Bombay. More than 15'000 to 20'000 people rendered homeless in one single day earlier this months. Countrywide protest against these evictions. The court has not been sympathetic. Consortiom files litigations etc.

On the state of the Indian women's movements

Question from the audience: (Which political groups are resisting these developments?(????))

K: The largest group has been the All India Democratic Women's Federation, which is the women's wing of the communist party. They are very much part of the Women's Movement and they have been part of every action, every movement, that has happened in support of the rights of migrant people and evicted people. But this doesn't mean that the communist party is behind such a movement. So we have two states where the communist party is in power. In one of the – West Bengal – which is trying very hard to attract foreign capital right now, foreign investment. A couple of years ago we had a huge round of evictions of petty traders who were actually outraged because they said we've been voting for the communist party for all these years but they did it very intelligently through the municipal corporation and said that this was the municipal plan and the municipality had actually a huge plan for improving the urban infrastructure in Calcutta. There's a huge Worldbank loan there. So as part of the first phase of that loan was to clear up those messy urban housing settlements. So they were the ones doing huge eviction. At the centre women and other parties not in power will protest. But when it comes to their own stakes and the stakes have always to do with attracting foreign investment, there there's no compromise. And we've had this phenomenon for the last ten years: All our political parties from the extreme right to the extreme left, their economic policies in their manifestos are more or less the same. There there's not much to chose.

And the other half of your question as I understood it: What position do middle-class-women take on this. And that's very difficult to answer in onw word. Because – I mean middle class women identify themselves with different identities. So there are middle class women who are part of the women's movement, part of other social movements, who would take opposition. There are very many middle-class-women for whom their caste is hugely important, who would perhaps take a position based on that cast-identity. And there is also a very sizeable (...(Seitenwechsel)....number of women supporting the fundamentalist parties....) ...for example in Gujarat they were pretty visible and pretty active. So they see themselves as nationalists, and they see their support for such evictions as part of their nationalist agenda. As far as they're concerned, they're getting rid of terrorists. And if not terrorists: Breeding grounds for terrorists.

Autonomous and communist womens' groups

Question from the audience (.....muffled...):

K: We have a fairly large and fairly strong women's movements, which has different kinds of organisations:

- The largest: IDWA, the women's wing of the communist party, at least 5, 6 Mio. registered memebers.

- We: autonomous feminist groups, not linked to parties, about 42 such groups in a network. Identify as feminists. Joined in terms of strategizing, campaigns.
- Women's groups who don't think of themselves as feminists. Work on women's rights. NGOs, development work.

„When it comes to taking political positions, more and more on most issues we are – we as the autonomous women's network – are able to take similar position with IDWA. This was not the case six or seven years ago. But more and more we find them more and more open to dialogue and we find ourselves – to be open – also open to dialogue. Twenty years ago, there were two issues we and IDWA were very far apart. Their analyses is the standard classic marxist analysis which says class oppression and economic oppression are at the centre of feminist theorizing. Ours was very much more seeing violence and seeing sexuality at the centre of our analysis. I mean, ours was also a socialist analysis but our hassle with them in every discussion would be whether you saw the economic issues as central.

Today we are building the economic issues into our analysis and they are coming to march with us for gay and lesbian rights. You know, twenty years ago, IDWA walked out away from a women's day march because a lesbian group had their banner. And IDWA said: No way! You are not! Talking about sexual rights and sexual identities is actually weakening the class struggle. They walked away from that march and had a separate march. Today they jointly with us in a petition in a public litigation in the supreme court – you know we have an extremely horrible and ancient piece of legislation which says: Unnatural sex, sex against the order of nature is punishable by prison and something. So we are trying to get that law knocked off the books. And IDWA is a party to that case.

So I think over the years our own experiences and our own struggles have kind of made us less hard-lines on our theoretical positions. And it's really obvious that unless we speak in one voice we're actually weakening the movement. So today there is much more congruence between the political and the autonomous women's groups.

Feminists and development NGOs

With the NGOs it's very difficult to say, what political positions they take. Many of them take funds – let's say from the World Bank. Many of them are implementing projects for forming women's collectives to manage water resources and implement user fees. So when we are campaigning against globalization, „Women's voices against the World Bank“, those groups are not going to join with us.

But when we talk about women's rights to basic services and women's right to survival and all of that, then they will come. But we don't see them as a political kind of force. And they are very strongly, they are very clear that they don't want to identify themselves as feminist. It's partly because of some way of understanding feminism as anti-men, or something like that, and partly because of their existential situation. They are very often mixed groups, they are often working with grants on these gender-mainstreaming-kind of programmes. And really, many of them have not been through the sort of feminist struggle which we think we

have been through. I mean our organisations formed out of some kind of political struggle. Whereas theirs have been formed out of some grant. So there is a fundamental difference there. Also still we have huge common platforms, and common issues.

Different strategies vis-à-vis globalisation

A: Maybe I can just put a question around the women's movement. When you talk about the two Indias, obviously a lot of women are also profiting from the present economic expansions in some sectors, for example the IT-Sectors. Have there been conflicts between women's groups around the present economic agenda? Are those women who are profiting from the current economic development organized in any form?

K: I think in general middle-class women are not organized around issues like these. For instance, I don't think there is any organisation of women IT-professionals, let's say. There might be professional kinds of organisations, but not rights-kind of organisation. And most women's groups if not all women's groups do work with poor women. I mean, there is no way that you can ignore the issue of poverty, you can't ... I mean: We can't define our feminism without defining in terms of poverty and the situation of poor women. So in that sense there is no conflict. But there is a conflict in the there is a difference in the way we understand globalisation. I think everybody, every women's group or every one working with women would agree that the impact of neoliberal policies in our country on women has been negative. There is almost 100% agreement on this. Because it is so obvious and so visible. So whether in terms of income or quality of life, or this violence, and all of this. Everybody would agree that so far the impacts have been largely negative. There is a number of quantitative data also to prove this.

The difference is really in the strategizing. There is very large group – not just of women's organisation, but also of mixed organisations – which says even if the impact has been negative, neo liberal globalisation is a given. And by protesting it, we can't change the stream, so we should actually be strategising how we could minimize the negative impact and gain some benefit from this. This is one quite vocal body of opinion in India.

And there's the other body of opinion which is ours, which really feels that there is a fundamental flaw in this plan of globalisation which has to be opposed.

Now the group which feels that we should look at it also as an opportunity, these are the groups which are doing let's say micro-credits on a huge scales, these are the groups which are doing skill-building and training for women in the informal sector, which say, let's see in a contract chain let's see if we can link up a women's group with some big company in the west. So they are linking up poor women's groups with H&M, for instance. Or with CAT (???). They are saying okay, let's capture, if we have this advantage of cheap labour, let's capture – on our own terms – some of that money.

So the difference is completely on strategy, on the fact that so far the impact has been negative, there is no contact. Those who refuse to recognise that the impact has been negative,

is the middle-class and the affluent class who are not part of movements anyway. They refuse to recognise anything other than their reality. So those people are not even connected with the debate.

Question from the audience: What are your strategies?

K: I have been talking about groups who are looking for economic opportunities for women. We as JAGORI and most of the autonomous women's groups don't actually subscribe to that strategy. We are looking at a) creating huge public movements to protest and to use all our available democratic instruments to say that this is not what the people of this country want. And this is not the way in which policy should be made. And this is really the same strategy which we have used in many other movements in the country, whether it is the environmental movement or the anti-globalisation-movement or the human rights movements and so on. So on one hand it's building a public mobilisation around these issues so it ultimately becomes a political issue on which people are voting. And at the same time using all legal, constitutional instruments to try and build some kind of protection for those who are at the receiving end. So we constantly try to use all of these instruments together.

Initially, I think, our strategies were heavily weighted towards legal means. Today we try to do both of them together. Because this a classic case where the legal framework is actually quite strong. The problem is in the implementation of those laws. The gap is in the implementation of the laws. And those gaps can only be addressed by political organisation and struggle.

And of course the other strategy that the women's movement is using more and more is to try and come together with other movements. We have been – I mean we have always been accused of being an isolationist kind of movement – the women's movement only looking to each other for support and all of that. But we have now consciously trying to establish a platform for dialogue between movements, trying to unify struggles. Anti-Globalisation, HR. And it is our women's movement that has very clearly seen the links between militarisation and globalisation, and I think more and more movements are seeing this – are trying to explicate this in their own context.

Globalisierung und Fundamentalismus

A: In our media, religious fundamentalism is often portrayed as a movement against globalisation, as being in opposition to globalisation and a return to regional values etc. And you have now said that the two go hand in hand. Would you go as far as to say that they strengthen each other?

K: In our context, we see them very strongly reinforcing each other. In our country we have the advantage of seeing both islamic fundamentalism and hindu fundamentalism. I think, it's really there that some of these things have become very visible. First, that this rhetoric of

nationalism that is linked with religious fundamentalism – OUR country and OUR economy and all of that – we feel this operates at a very superficial level. We've seen fundamentalist movements having very clearly two or three wings. There is one wing which is dominated by the religious leaders which talks about the purely religious concepts, in the hindu religion women are supposed to be like this...supposed to do that....not be this or that. And this is the same in islamic fundamentalism.

There is another wing which translates this religious rhetoric into the political action of who should be privileged in the hierarchy and who should be not privileged.

And there is the third wing which is actually planning on how we will come to political power and how they will use this political power. \$

In a sense these three wings seem to function independently of each other. But actually the wing which is really strategizing and theorizing understands very clearly the linkage between the three and uses them very clearly. So while the religious wing does not speak at all about economics or nationalism, the second wing would speak very clearly about nationalism and economic nationalism, you know: „These people have come from Pakistan taking your jobs, don't you see all the car mechanics are muslim, if we throw them out then hindus will get these jobs, and so on.“ This we call economic nationalism, which is not explained.

At the third wing, which is really the pinking part of these movements and the most dangerous. This is the one which is translating this rhetoric in such a way that it no longer contradicts the logic of globalisation but actually supports it.

To give you a very crude type of example – and to tell you it's argued in quite a complex way – if India can take advantage, make use of its comparative advantage of cheap labour in such a way that every major company in america is giving us, is outsourcing their software to us: That is economic nationalism. We've captured their market. So if India can develop their market in such a way that every yard of silk or every three kilo of rice in Russia is Indian: that's economic nationalism. So the crude form of saying: Our country, our product, our jobs, is argued in a sophisticated way and that argument completely supports the scheme of integration into global markets, relaxation of controls, modernisation and so on and on.

And I have not studied islamic fundamentalism so much but it's my feeling that it is precisely the same in countries that are dominated by islamic fundamentalism. And there are many, many evidences of this. In our country the hindu right is supported majorly, financially by non-resident Indian community who are the Silicon-Valley-People, the corporate people, all the Indians who are right on top of the corporate world all over the world. They are the ones who are supporting hindu fundamentalism in India. And one is forced to ask: What is in it for them? There has to be a pay-off. And if you look at political manifestos the pay-off is clear.

Question from the audience about the importance of caste:

K: The movement against caste being the oldest movement – an issue central to all movements – most difficult issue. In the women's movement: First a unifying vision of

feminism. Then after about 10 Years an assertion of Dalit-Feminism. Cast-oppression also in the women's feminism. New groups. Same time: lesbian movement splitting off. At that point the analysis was: this is weakening the movement. „Now, ten years down the line, we are coming together where we are independent groups and we are working together with those.... trying to work together with those differences. „Working together“ I bite my tongue, it would be a huge arrongance to think we do, we are trying to do that. That's the same I think in all movement. Although the gay and lesbian rights movement is far more strongly aligned with the feminist movement that it is to any other. But that separation or that recognition of difference has not happened in the environmental movement or the anti-globalisation-movement. I think it's obvious that it is the women's movement which has really looked at the personal and that's where this question of difference has come out.“

Dalit-issues are central to globalisation-issues. Most marginalized. Huge bulk of the agricultural, daily paid labour.

Feminists vs CocaCola

Question from the audience: Read in the news about a case against Coca-Cola which was won by the women's movement. If his impression is correct, that the women's movement is one of the strongest movements in India?

K: That case was really a landmark victory, fought in the court as well. Not just by the women's movement. This was initially from the environmentalist angle. Coca Cola built a factory in a place in Kerala which is actually a bio-sphere-reserve, it's one of the places most rich in bio-diversity, and these people were there to make Coca Cola and they needed lot's of water. They would drain ground water and putting back contaminated water with all the chemicals and everything. Now, untreated into a river which flows through that area. So this factory has been operating there for three or four years and in three or four years the number of species which are being affected was initially what caught the eye. But when they raised this as an environmental issue – actually this is an area almost completelythe tribal community lives there. So the tribal rights movement and the environmental movement first raised it. They had demonstrations, they had huge kind of physical action to try and get them out. They went to court and the court rejected their petition. At that point it became a much larger issue. Probably it was only the women's movement which kept fighting for five years. You know, time after time after time that case kept being dismissed, bringing it back to a higher court. But it's really a joint victory of this joint front of movements. And it's a landmark because they've said very clearly ... the argument that the company gave was that they had bought the land and that this was legitimate capital investment which government policies allow and which the government of Kerala had invited as foreign direct investment. But the ruling is a landmark as they said that common property and common capital for wellbeing like air and water – cannot be... the right to this cannot be given by the government to anybody. It really is a landmark. I will help in many other cases. They have said that even

though the government had not said we are selling the water, if what they're doing is contaminating the water or the air, then the people there have a right to claim that. So it's really ... and coming at a time when it is depressing, horrible things are happening, so it's good to see.

But Coca Cola has said that they will go to the WTO with this against the Indian government saying that their investment is not protected. But I don't think they will come back to Blagimora (???) - the whole country is aware of this now. And over these five years there have been demonstrations of literally hunder-of-thousands of people in that village. So that's this.

To the second part of your question, whether the women's movement is the strongest. I think at different points in time different movements have risen. For instance the movement against the Narmada-Damm. That is the longest sustained movement, that is the movement which has kept up – with very little resources. There are very strong movements in the south, and so on. But I think something that came out at the Mumbai WSF which many people felt and which we experienced perhaps the women's movement is the one which has the most vibrancy and the most energy. We have opened this ...we have gone onto a really very broad kind of network most of the other movements have focused on a narrow band. And we have a movement that has tried to link with other groups, which has tried to make the connections between the issues and which still has the energy, after getting a hundred kicks, still has the energy to get up and do some things. So that think, I think, Mumbai WSF seem to show.“
(The World Social Forum)

Feminism after the Gujarat-Massacre: Focus on „syncretic culture“

Question from the audience: (...muffled...)

K: Struggle against fundamentalism has become the central issue. „The real reflection we did on that came after Gujarat. Because for us, Gujarat was like.... it shocked us... it seem to put into question everything that we believed in, over the last 20, 25 years. And it really forced us to ask all the grassroots women's groups with whom we have been working and sharing and building this collective philosophy. Why were they not able to resist this kind of violence? Why is it that they as a movement were not able to see it was coming? And why is it that it got such huge endorsement and such huge support from the middle class which we thought is exposed to a more global sort of worldview. It was very, very difficult for us to understand why the urban Indian middle class, the MTV- and MacDonal-kind-of-people support hindu fundamentalism. Which is really, it's lunatic in it's formulation, it's horrible. So we could just not understand it. And I think we (...) on things we are doing now. Because we feel that working with poor women to resist fundamentalism when it happens is not enough. We have to start... we are working now with middle class men and women and using this notion of syncretic culture rather than religion as the defining thing in the Indian identity. So suddenly we have gone back to doing the kind of cultural activism which we used to do twenty years

ago and which we had stopped doing – to be very honest with you – we have moved far more into legal work and policy influencing, you know, issue based campaigns. Whereas just ... doing cultural and political education at the grassroots ...what we realized was: As we were moving away from it, the hindu fundamentalist party, particularly the RSS, which is the cultural wing of the hindu party, had actually been doing very strong and very sustained huge grassroots work over a decade. Very low profile. But they had actually been doing political education in the true marxist sense of the word, except that the content was complete hindu fundamentalism and hindu nationalism. So I think one major shift in strategy which has happened to us after Gujarat is to go back to cultural, political activism. At the grassroots. To start once again to talk about those kind of visions.

The second thing is we have started to work with children because one thing that has been forced to everybody's attention is the extent to which this kind of violence, ugly nationalism, ugly constructions of identities are actually built into the education system. We have been working on gender analysis of the curriculum and trying to get the curriculum to reflect gender equality. In the same way what we have to do now is to look at the curriculum from the lense of secularism and rights and all of those (...)

We have started to work with middle class women and men. So for instance what JAGORI has started to do... We've always had a film club and we showed feminist films to which our feminist friends come. And their boyfriends and familiy. Now we have opened up that film club and we are showing main-stream-feature-films of a different kind. Which make people see issues in a different way. But these are films which tell good stories, you know. We found that this new film club has been a terrific plattform to start dialgouing with middle class people. Urban middle class people who just come because it's a film that they want to see. Not because it carries some message.“

Talking to young people – colleges – these are the new strategies. „This whole idea of syncretic culture. That actually what we talk about as hindu culture is not purely hindu culture but there are traditions from Islam, from Christianity, from many countries: From China, from Turkey, from Iran. And unpacking this culture is proving to be a fascinating education for us also.“