Feminist Freedom Warriors

Flavia Agnes

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CTM: So welcome we are talking today—it's the 18th of December 2016 and we're talking to Flavia Agnes in Mumbai. Welcome and thank you so much for doing this for us.

FA: Thank you for having me, and it's a great honor to be here, to be part of this series of interviews.

CTM: Yeah, I think it's been a really amazing project for Linda and me to talk to so many people across different contexts and…yeah. So maybe we'll start by asking you to talk a little bit about how you came to do the kind of feminist activist work and legal work that you are now doing. So just tell your story in whatever way makes sense.

FA: It's a long story actually. I am now 69 years old. It's been a really long story. It starts with marriage at age of 20. I was in this marriage for 13 years, until 1980 and it's been a very violent marriage and I had three children in that marriage but I knew that it should not happen, it's wrong, et cetera but I didn't know how to move out of it and belonging to a Roman Catholic faith, marriage is supposed to be permanent and there's no way out of marriage because divorce is not recognized. So there's always the message to adjust and always the problem of what did you do wrong and if you could do something differently then violence would stop. So the marriage was 13 years. At the end of 13 years, it was 1980 and then it was the anti-rape campaign; and that's the fledgling women's movement and it was being written about in women's journals, et cetera and then I happened to hear a lecture by a young feminist in our church. Then I actually asked her, "You said all this but what exactly do you actually do?" and through her contacts she put me onto somebody else and then I came to the meeting of the Forum Against Oppression of Women in 1980. So that was a turning point and I met a lot of women actually all the pioneers of the women's movement

today. Vibhuti Patel was there, Indira Jaisingh was there, a lot of women, very important women at that point of time. There were meetings and there again was a rape case outside of Mumbai and the group was investigating it so I joined—I can give you my book where my story is captured well. Next time you're here I'll give it to you. It talks about the marriage, my early life; I come from a small city called Mangalore. I studied there. After marriage I came to Mumbai and everything was strange and soon after that I became pregnant and the violence and the pregnancy and all of it was so alien to me I couldn't fathom what it was all about. It totally shattered me actually. And after some time you get used to it, you learn to cope with it but I didn't know anybody else who was going through that and it seemed as if only I was facing this kind of problem. But when you look closely and deeply you think, "Oh actually marriages are not great, every marriage has problem, but people adjust and you're supposed to be here. " But I couldn't reconcile to myself to being there so I really was desperate for it either to die or change. That was the only way out for me. So when I met this girl and I went to this group and I was very excited and I think nobody's life was changed so drastically and dramatically as mine was after that meeting, after this initial phase of feminism. I was a housewife, not a graduate but I was really excited about this group and the way they were talking and the rape case that was being investigated. And it so happened that—I used to give tuitions to schoolchildren to earn some money. That was April, May, schools had closed so I had time.

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It seemed very far, like two hours from Mumbai but now it seems very close. All the distances have come closer. So somebody had to go there and investigate and find out and my friend, Vibhuti, was sitting next to me—she was not my friend—she said "Why don't you go for this?" But I said, "I have never done anything like this. She said, "No, no, just come along, there are two-three people coming just come." And I was so house bound I didn't know how to travel by train, I didn't know how to travel by bus and I was not from the city and I didn't speak the language, et cetera. But anyway, tentatively I ventured and went to that place.

CTM: How old were you then?

FA: Thirty-three.

CTM: Early thirties.

FA: I took my girls with me and they were enjoying the whole thing so much. They were coming out of the home and they were meeting other people. They thought it was like a day excursion going on and there it so happened it was a turning point. I

didn't know anything; nobody else also knew anything, anything better. Because everybody was—it was a new group and we were starting out on this but it so happened that this girl and her mother and her community spoke the language that I know, from Karnataka, from Mangalore. So I was able to communicate with them very well and then when I came back and I—Indira Jaisingh was coordinating with us so we were supposed to report back to her. I said I'll give you a written report and I'll give all my insights—what happened there, that girl tried to commit suicide, her father was beating her for having been raped, she was raped by policemen. So that was my experience. That was—the meetings were held at a place, which we now call NGO but that time it was a library and the person coordinating that—no, something else happened. Every time I went to this place, two-hour journey back and forth they would ask me, "What's your background? Why have you joined? Are you belonging to a political party?" et cetera, And I was tired of telling my story so then I decided that I'll come to that office and I'll type my story. Title was *Why I Joined the Forum*. It was 1981 by then. No, 1980 only. So I said, "If you want to know then please read my story, I am tired of speaking." So that told about the life of a middle class woman and domestic violence, till then we are not talking about domestic violence. We're talking about dowry death and rape. Very far away issues, not really affecting middle class women and then people couldn't believe it. They said, "It can't be. It can't be she is battered. She doesn't look like that. She looks too confident. Her children look confident. How can she be beaten?" But every time I would go back I'd get beaten. I had taken it in my stride so when that happened this group was—they're all like journalists, professionals, doctors, lawyers or PhD students and all they come from particular strata. And mainly Hindu, upper caste. I mean not labeled as such but according to me they were. I was the other: Christian, minority, I couldn't really…they couldn't understand me and I couldn't understand them. And then the church, the whole church structure that divorce is not allowed. The common question was, "Why don't you leave? Why do you stay in this?" But I said, "I don't know how to get out and where to go. We have got children in school." Then there were some people who said, "I can help you, I can help you," etc. After that in 1980 the first conference, women's conference—activist conference—happened, in November. Meanwhile there was a person who was coordinator of the library who was also a feminist, and when I talked to her about domestic violence, she had just come from abroad, and she had visited health centers but also battered women shelters. So she had brought this word "battered women" and she also had a library so there were books there on feminism, etc. so I started reading. I started reading some first person accounts on battered women, also some studies—*Lenore Walker, The Cycle of* Violence, the first phase, second phase, third phase and I said it matches perfectly what I go through. And by that time, I had taken a distance from the violence. It was not me, it was happening to somebody else—I could understand, I could analyze.

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So she said, "Let's do a study about—small study—twenty-five middle class, twenty-five working class women". So I was doing that study and then at that conference I presented a paper. And that is the first paper ever on domestic violence. Though the focus of the conference was rape. It was Forum against Rape and this conference was also on how to bring on law reform et cetera, what we need to do, Mathura was very much in the context. You know the Mathura case?

CTM: Yeah, I do.

FA: So it was very much in the context. And then my paper was a little on the side. We were talking about this, we were talking about health, and we were talking about domestic violence. I remember we had five minutes to present. My friend was translating so she took ten minutes to translate my five minute presentation and I was very angry, I said why are you asking me to present it, what can I say in five minutes? Now after that, when I went back my husband was very angry with me. Like I said about why he was angry et cetera and this conference was on rape and it was Chandralekha who had the poster of this woman like Kali, who tramples on the head of a man. We talked about medical rape, we talked about state violence. Three days we were talking only rape. Agency of a women and how you can say no, all these newer concepts. So I went back and I must have become very assertive. I borrowed my friend's typewriter to type my paper. So then, I had also got a job in the community as a primary health worker of the community. So I was really oozing the conference by then and then my husband got angry at something else. Something else being that he thought I should be grateful for him letting me go and that I would be submissive, though I was so tired and I would accept to have sex et cetera and I said no, first time. And that was fine but the next day it just blew up and then he threw me out of the house along with the children. So this time I said 'I'm not going back'. So that was my first leaving in feminism. I had left many times back and forth, back and forth, this was my first leaving. And then my friend said we'll find you a place et cetera, but I cannot tell you the next few years what it was because I was so naïve, I really believed my friends saying they'll help me, support me, et cetera, et cetera. I really was naïve. I mean today I might not have believed and gone out but suddenly while everybody was ready to help, the help was so irrelevant; the help was so little. Children had to go to school, this had to happen, that had to happen, I had no money. Lots of things happened. I started living in a rented apartment. My children had to be admitted midterm to school, I cannot tell you how difficult it was. Then I came back after 6 months and meanwhile I was doing research. I had presented a preliminary paper but the research was going on. So because of all this, because I couldn't cope, because I'm also asthmatic, so my asthma got aggravated, and my children were 8 and 10 years old, I really don't like to talk about that phase of my life. And also, there

was this thing that ,you know, you don't look like a battered woman, or you get pointed, "Oh, oh, she's the one. She's the battered woman". My life was so public. Suddenly I would meet someone at a bus stop and they'd say, "Oh your daughter had fever, how is she now?' I don't even know her name. How does she know all this, you know? So my life was so public. And then when I went back it became a big issue that I had let down the movement. And I initially I was very calm and I said I did what I could and now it's not possible I'm not ready. Then the whole list somebody wrote, that we did this, we did this, we did this for her, and look how she has let down the movement. Then I really lashed out at them. In my study many of them had spoken, my mother, my sister, et cetera. I said why didn't you want to make your mothers and sisters icons, why do you want to make me? I don't want to die and for my photo to be garlanded on the wall forever and ever. Icon—you have one Mathura, you have one Flavia, I don't want to be that.

FA: I'm a living person, I want to live my life. So all that happened and there was like—it was divided, the movement was divided, for me, against me, et cetera. Anyway, when I went back, by that time the person who gave me this project to do the study wrote to the funders saying that she stopped having faith in me.

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CTM: Because you went back?

FA: Not because I went back, she was really supportive of my going back. But she thought this wider thing, she thought in the wider movement I would not be accepted. So the whole project was to start a women's center, as a battered women support center in the model that she had seen and I thought it was really exciting because I thought that's what we needed. I didn't know how much I should say—anyway. So then what happened, she wrote to the funders saying that I am not capacle of doing that work, and can we use that for starting a health center? I accidentally came across it. Then I took it up and I said, "How can you do this? On what basis how are you doing this?" I said, "You were fully supportive of my going back, how does this happen in the middle and how do you do this behind my back?" Because your project monies come because you showcase me. Everybody was showcasing me by then, and not even in Bombay, everywhere. So I had to fight my way, and I'm sure this story is similar for many black women as well. In a mixed group, how you get singled out and everything that happens is so much of extra exaggerated and your problems are everyday problems—you're melancholy, you're always having problems, one or the other. But I enjoyed being there. So then I fought and I got money and then I asked the meeting of the trustees. All this I didn't know, but I said I need to talk to you all. You know Teesta, no?

CTM: Yes.

FA: You know Teesta's husband Javed no?

CTM: Yes.

FA: So my friend was married to Javed, and Javed was trustee, and so was my friend. And there was a third person. So he said I will support my wife and I said, "That's not fair, I'm talking to you as a trustee," and there was a third person there. Anyway they would be the majority but I fought my way out and I said I will make this public. I was very strong willed—it's my survival—so I started a women's center on small scale in 1981, and somebody gave space in their own home. By the time I went back, I couldn't trust my friends so all my material was there, I took it home. I went back to my matrimonial home and stayed there. Put the children back in school and all that. One day a small fight happened, my husband found all the material, in those days typewriters and all, he tore the whole thing. Full. All the files. Everything. Then actually I had done an interview with my sister-in-law, because my brother also used to beat his wife. She called my brother, she said see what's she done. Not only me but she's implicated you, so this male bonding happened, and that study went. We started with a women's center. So I was staying with a friend who was really supportive and the women's center started and continued . It was the first support center for battered women.

CTM: This was in Mumbai?

FA: Yeah. Everything was in Mumbai. My whole life. So then what happened was…meanwhile I had bought a place. It was very far away in Borivali with small rooms. My children weren't happy there, because they were upper middle class, and they were not getting used to poverty, and lowering your standards. But in the middle of it we're having fun because we come from these meetings and go for movies along with the group. I wouldn't say it was all bad but it was very mixed. Then this friend encouraged me that you have to go to college and you have to give your exam and she really helped me—the open university. She said you have to do your graduation.

CTM: So you went to Open University?

FA: SNDT.

CTM: Oh, SNDT?

FA: So my friends said graduation is not necessary—what does it matter, you've been doing fantastic work. And my children also believed that. we don't need to study, we are activists and my friend said, "Excuse me Flavia, all the people who are advising you are PhDs or professionals. You will be forever be like this." And then I used to follow up the case, etc. so the one person from the Forum – she was not a

theoretician but subsequently she went abroad and became a theoretician. So one of the comments she made was, "There are some people who think and some people who act'. I was saying only same people are going and doing this and all. And she said, "Yeah because we think and some act." And we are supposed to be in feminism, and all equal etc., etc. I said, "But those who act also can think". How can you not be able to think?

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CTM: Separation, yeah.

FA: And how can we bring information to you so that you start thinking on the material that I brought? I said, "What is this?" Because I don't come from an academic background my thinking is very original and it has continued like that. So I brought in the new term "domestic violence". From dowry death and rape I changed the discourse to domestic violence. And I was terribly against having laws related to dowry because, I said, that is very constraining. Indian women don't die from dowry, they die from domestic violence. And they die because there is no support from their natal family. If they have support from their natal family they don't have to be in this situation. And for me there's no mother in law, there's no alcoholism. My husband was doing very well and was a company secretary in a Tata company. So all your clichés about domestic violence did not fit my situation. The violence was very real. And then you come to know about so many middle class – upper middle class women—Rinky was there—so many people came out and said about domestic violence. But it was all after I wrote my autobiography. And then women center happened and women used to come, etc., etc., but then again we see the same kind of hierarchies. "We are giving you advice, we are the counselors." Without any background of counseling you think because you are sitting there, you have the power over those women who come and you can be judgmental. So I had lots of issues in 1986. By that time time I had graduated. Three years. So my friend was very, very… pushing me and she said, "Don't believe any of them. Unless you have degree you will not go anywhere." And also my children, she says what do you mean study is not important. She said, "Do you know the people who are telling – what kind of background they are in? And without degree how will you earn a living?" So I became a graduate. Meanwhile I had differences in the Center so I left. But by that time I had become a lawyer but I did not want to practice as a lawyer because I thought that was really cliché. It's like okay what great thing to become a lawyer? I was more interested in starting a center where women's reentry program, like if you're a school dropout, or you're a victim of domestic violence, you come out. Then what are the skills you can learn to earn a living? And the legal aid should be integrated into that. And I thought YWCA would be an ideal place because they have

premises, they have hostals, etc. So I did a small project with them. I did all these little small things. But though I had a law degree and I was not interested in joining a law firm. Then there's a friend who provoked me—Sonal Shukla . She said, "You're scared of becoming a lawyer. You're very happy in this informal domain, working with the YWCA, etc. You don't have the guts to become a lawyer." I said, "Oh, that reuires guts? That doesn't require guts. *This* requires guts. But anyway I can show you that I can be a lawyer." So I dumped all that and became a lawyer. That was in 1989, by the time I was 40. So I joined Indira Jaisingh's law firm Lawyers Collective, but a very short time. And then there was one article where one girl—she was a junior—and me had worked together. And she published it without my name, and her name, because she didn't want her name. I said, "Excuse me I can't work in this set up. This is my first article as a lawyer on family court functioning." At the time family courts had just started. I said, "People still think of me as an activist so it is very important that I write as a lawyer." Because for a long time people didn't accept that I am a lawyer at all. Firstly battered woman, then activist, and then lawyer. So I had to really prove myself. Then in 1991 we started Majlis. So that was another journey, now 25 years of that journey is over. So there would be a legal center and a cultural center, and I was part of the legal center. And the person who was running the cultural center, you might have heard of her name—Madhushree Dutta? So we were very close. We were together involved. And that is how we set up Majlis.

CTM: Right and what are the sort of core values and also the kind of cases that you think have been the most significant in the last twenty-five years that you've worked on—?

FA: My cases or in general?

CTM: In Majlis itself.

FA: So we have two centers. One for culture, one for law, which were working very autonomously. I was the only lawyer then we started applying for grants and started functioning very, very slowly. Lots of challenging cases of extreme violence of various sorts, and where women…

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It's like we had—I did a case of a grandfather raping a three-year-old granddaughter, from a very affluent section, and no court is ready to believe. I was doing a case of a woman coming lower-middle class, married to a newly rich, nouveau riche kind person from the same community; that's my community and she was always humiliated—rather than dowry, and demand for dowry, it was the other way around that her mother-in-law didn't even want her to bring a nightdress from her mother's

house because they though it was below their dignity. That's way I say, it is not *dowry*. Certain humiliation can come in so many different ways. And finally something small happened, and she tried to commit suicide and she had a two-year-old daughter, and her daughter was disowned and disliked in that family so she gave posion to the daughter also. Then she survived and the daughter died. It was a case of murder. And this woman did not even know; there was reconciliation so she went back, and got another daughter. After some years the husband's family took away the daughter and then they put this case said, oh she has already killed one child and she is mentally unstable and now she wants to kill another child. So that case I did for 7-8 years. Murder case and then residents and all these kinds of hundreds of different issues but I secured for her the right to matrimonial home and I secured for her child custody, and I got her out of the criminal case of murder. She was convicted of suicide but not for murder, because for suicide she left a note saying that I'm killing myself, and that was a manipulated note because she was unconscious. Only her signature is there, and father-in-law—'my father, he loves me, I'm neurotic and I do all these things,' etc. Our main thing always was right to matrimonial home, that she has a right to stay there. You cannot throw her out. So I'm always very concerned about economic rights of women. Because I suffered because my husband left his job and the case was going on, so I didn't have support at all. I was doing small NGO work, so my children really had to go through a lot of deprivation, but anyway my children studied and graduated. I took custody of my daughters. So because of that I was all the time, when I talk to women, my first concern was, okay there's violence and all, but where will you stay? What is your support mechanism? Unless you work that out you cannot leave the home. And this is what I say: I would never have left the home had I worked this out before. I wouldn't have gone through so much. So by the time I finished my law…I finished my LLM, post-graduation in Law By the time—Bombay, the riots happened. So I all the time looked at minority rights and gender. How both of them—the interface between the two, and particularly for minority women. Till then our slogan was that all of us are same. We're all one. Suddenly I said, we're not all one. You know how the riots actually affect Hindu women, Muslim women so different—how their houses are burned, how their sons are killed. Where we were located there was a…next day of the Babri masjid demolition, the police at point blank killed about fifteen boys between the ages of sixteen and twenty. Young boys, they were burning a tire and the police just opened fire. And they were all around us, and they were burning people on the road where the office was and I think Majlis' ideology was shaped by that experience.

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FA: While we do gender, we also have to do minorities. Marginalization. We have to have a framework, theoretical framework for understanding minority women, where both, violence is there, patriarchy is there, issues of gender are there, but also issues of community are there. How do you bring these together? Which has been my very important concern and I started writing about it which, became became quite unpopular within the feminist movement. Till then it was only domestic violence and whatever. As a minority I had the consciousness of being a minority. I spoke with at the Jadavpur conference in 1991 and that conference I was invited to speak as minority activist—plenary session.

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I said, "By that logic, you are majority academicians, so let me have our locations very clear and let me address you from that location." And there was so much of furor over that—"How is she dividing the movement, how is she saying majority, minority?" I said, "I didn't create the divide. A label was given to me. I'm just using the label." Then I talked about all the cultural symbols like Kali and Durga and this and that. At that time Babri masjid had not been demolished. Food choices, vegetationism. When people come to my house, either they want to eat meat or they'll be like, oh I hope you're not cooking meat, you're not cooking fish. You know this kind of food politics. Way back in 1991. And then I talked about uniform civil code and how all of our feminist symbols are Hindu and Sanskrit and how minority women can identify with these symbols. They want to belong culturally but at the same time you want to challenge patriarchy so how do we work this out? So that again became very controversial. Many other people have written about it.

CTM: It's interesting. It's very parallel to some of the stuff that we were going through in the US right?

LEC: Right. Very similar.

FA: So this is 1992.

CTM: Mhm. We were doing the same thing in the 80s, early 90s. Same kind of questions.

LEC: Same thing. Same kind of thing.

FA: And then we had chosen the name Majlis. It's an Urdu word.

CTM: Right.

FA: And we chose it to be fashionable because all other names, like Stree Shakti, Stree Mukti, etc., etc. But we didn't know what price we would have to be pay for it

because after riots we became suspect. And according to me the only political activity we had done is not to change the name, against all pressure. Just kept the name Majlis. So riots happened we were involved in relief work and then my perspective changed from just patriarchy and gender to a much more nuanced position on uniform civil code, minority rights, minority identity; and started speaking from that location.

LEC: That's an important switch.

FA: So that's about 1993. I published articles in *EPW* and other places. *EPW* was interesting because I'm not an academician. I didn't know about *EPW* and all but I did a study of a decade long legislative reform on violence against women. And I said after that they could wear abi. All of them they are asking for stringent punishment, this that and the other but we're not dealing with violence, violence is escalating. So what was wrong with each of the legislation that came? And how we have gone into a particular formula. That there is an issue of violence then we need a law. And that law has to be stringent law. Like death penalty and one grade less than death penalty continued to 2013 for the Nirbhaya case. I mean I wrote it in 1993, twenty years before, that this is not working. You see the statistics; this is not working. Nothing is changing. Dowry's there, this is there, everything is there. And why, you'd say, this is not working? "We need more stringent laws." That's the only answer that you have but not how to make the law work, how to enter space, how to understand the dynamics of law and courts. That has never been the concern. It's been very propagandist and the government also bought in very easily what—kiska kay jaata hai? "You want it? We'll give it to you." And then of course again there was a lull in the movement, then again something else, then again we want something else. So I continued as a lawyer where we enter that space we understand the dynamics of that space and mostly lawyers don't write. Active lawyers don't write.

FA: Those that write do not practice law. They may be legal academicians or anthropologists, like Srimati Basu, writing on law or Nivedita Menon writes from a sociological perspective or history perspective, or Ratna Kapur writes as a law person but not practicing law. There's nothing where a lawyer writes. Lawyers know all of these things but they don't write. Either they have no time or they think it's a waste of time. I always find it very exciting to write of the experiences of the law.

LEC: So those who write then—sorry—those who write like you—

FA: There are not many people who write like me.

LEC: Yeah. Not many.

FA: Because mine is not academic writing. Mine is experiential writing .

LEC: Okay so that's the point I was getting to…

FA: And you theorize from experience.

LEC: Yeah. So in that regard, thinking about that history and having located yourself in it and it's that experience that brought you to this point, right?

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FA: Yeah, and firstly, my own story. My own experience of court.

LEC: So how would you say then that your work and that long trajectory and the change that you have contributed to, how do you see that impacting other women's lives?

FA: Okay let me finish this story. Then what happened in 2011…so it continued, lots of ups and downs, we were doing family court litigation then we got domestic violence act in 2005. That's a new act that's supposed to protect rights of women. So we shifted from only family court to magistrate's court and criminal court to secure the rights of women who are thrown out: right to matrimonial home, injunctions against violence, all of that. In 2011, this is very important turning point yet again. By then older the people had left, new people joined, lot of interns. The new internal structure of Majlis itself underwent change. Then at some point I think in 2007 or 2008, my daughter, Audrey, joined me. She was doing other things and she had three kids and all. When people left I was at a very low ebb. By that point I had become 60. I said okay this is a sign that I should retire now ,because there's no money, there are no people and it's very difficult to build an organization. And I've done my bit and all—I'm sorry, this is the end of the story. But she said, no, I will join and I will help you, provided you help me to build to an organization. I'm not here to build you; I'm here to build an organization. From there we started again, newer people joining, newer funding coming, etc., etc. Now in 2011 there was a girl, a child, 4-year-old, next to our office—I live close to our office, my home is very close and between is the school—who was raped by the watchmen of that school and it came in the newspapers and I said, oh god who is doing this case? This is following other rape cases. I turn around I see really no one does a systematic program so I told my team have to do this but they said, no we're civil lawyers, we only do maintenance, child custody etc. I said, but excuse me, we're lawyers, if any other lawyer can do this work for defending the accused person, why we cannot do the support work? They said no, it's very complex, this civil law, it's very difficult. I said, we shall learn, it might take us time but we must do this. We cannot let—! Because his woman, whose child had been raped is a migrant from Bihar. Her daughter is a first generation literate. She's put through a lot of challenge in an English medium school. When this happened immediately she had gone to the police and for three days they did not

register the case. And then what happened was, by the time…and she was challenging the school authorities. And by that time, stories started coming out in newspapers that this woman is insane or she's asking to be paid off, like 10 lacs. She's after money. I was out of town but by the time I came back this story was already out. I said this women doesn't know what she is confronting or the structure she is confronting. And at the end of it if the guy is acquitted imagine what is going to happen to this woman and her child. And it is right next to our office. We have a moral and a living responsibility to cater to her needs, to help her, go through this journey. 2011 we started, two years we walked the journey with her and finally we got a conviction, despite all the odds. Just our dedication—and our young girls, who had not yet graduated as lawyers, and against them was a very high profile criminal lawyer, and this whole board of trustees, etc. Despite that we got conviction in that case. But in the meantime, 2012, there was a new law, child sexual abuse. In November. That expanded the definition of rape—penetrative, non-penetrative etc., etc. That was November 14, birth day of Jawarhaelal Nehru, Children's Day. One month later, Nirbhaya happened. Suddenly, domestic violence went into the background and rape came in the foreground. But by the time we had mastered the legal system, and the police needed our help because we knew exactly what the law was etc., etc. and they called us to conduct the training. So when we conducted the training we said we conduct the training, you don't pay us.

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But after we conduct the training you need to give us access to victims and if we see that your office has not followed up what he start then he should take action against. Then they agreed. So that was the beginning of working with state sectors very closely. And today we have followed up on 600-700 rape cases. We have mastered the grammar of it. Criminal system, what do you do, what is FIR, what is this, how do you train the police, how do you train the doctors, how do you help this child to face cross examination? And while the national statistics of conviction is as less as twenty-five percent, but more in Bombay it is like ten-twelve percent, ours is like seventy-seventy-five percent. So with this what do you understand? If you know the structure, if you understand the grammar of it and if you help this little child—and most of our victims are under eighteen—and you help them—"this is the lawyer who cross examined you, this is the judge who is supposed to help you, you can ask for a break, you can ask for water"; simple things. She's illiterate, she doesn't know anything. So our whole team, as a whole we have started a domestic violence unit and we started a sexual violence unit and it's very unique that we're actually doing these cases. And with that we get so much insight of the working of the law. So now we have this

program. Now we need to have newer programs to respond to the current needs of what has happened.

LEC: But having a significant impact on women's lives significantly and—

FA: Very slowly, case by case.

LEC: And the judicial system, managing the judicial system.

FA: Once you make them sensitive then you change it for the whole state, for the city.

LEC: It's quite an accomplishment to get the definition of rape changed.

FA: That happened before. We didn't change that but after definition came, and then protection came, I said, it is a law, now we are going to follow it. Most of the time you get a law and you forget about. But to make that law happen…

LEC: Force them to implement it.

FA: Yeah. Prosecutors…this one…that one. It's a Herculean task. And after that we started doing a similar thing for domestic violence, case by case and, structure by structure. State. Our main focus is by helping women, we have to make the state accountable. So bring in the accountability.

CTM: So what's the—

FA: That's my story.

CTM: Yeah. Perfect. Actually not only is your story but it's the story of an entire genealogy of one major aspect of Indian women's movement in this country, right?

FA: Yes it is. Yes it is. Thank you, yes.

CTM: It is a really—that's really, really important.

LEC: Some changes—

FA: So I've been taking very controversial issues like rape and domestic violence, and the dowry, minority rights, etc., etc., and there are a lot of people who would like to write me off, but they can't because our work is so unique. It is experiential.

CTM: And you've had successes by just staying with it.

FA: A lot of people would like to say…but they cannot really say because we're the only ones going to court for women. Nevermind what is the issue.

LEC: And the change is documented.

FA: I'm supposed to finish—my book is ready but last minute touches I've not been able to do because I got into this controversy of UCC again. It's raising its head and it's so important to *be* there.

CTM: So talk a little bit about—you've been working on these issues for a very long time. How has it been to work on these issues and be part of the larger Indian feminist movement or even outside of India? What have been some of the kind of ways, or has it been even useful to build some connections, or bridges with people doing this kind of work in other countries, also other kind of work in India and so on?

FA: Actually, my work is very, very local. It's here. Like within this organization, I'm very happy working there. In Bombay or nationally, there is a whole clique of the groups who think in one way. It's very difficult to argue, to bring in another argument and to see another perspective. My way of dealing with it is to write. You have something there, you write. You publish it, in *EPW*, in various newspapers. I ran a column in *Asian Age* for three years. Continuously you write.

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Almost every week you write and publish something. Whether you agree or disagree. But, it's been important in India, but I think more important abroad. Suddenly I get an invitation out of the blue, like Harvard or to Yale or to Oxford, and I don't know why those invitations come, but I think that every invitation is an opportunity, so I accept and I go and I speak. If you think that's global—and then when Ishita came, and there where at least about ten women ther,e who said, "Flavia, we follow you very closely," or "We teach you, and you have given us so much insight". And my *EPW* article about triple talaq, etc. issue is very controversial here but they said, and lots of other women in Calcutta also said, oh my god that article opened up a door for us, and see the nuances that you're bringing *in*. That is my satisfaction that I feel that one has to write, one has to continue to write, and people can engage with it. Either agree, disagree, that doesn't matter but that theoretical debate must go on.

CTM: Right. So it's both. So it's this activism at different levels that you're engaging in.

LEC: Real praxis.

FA: And I encourage my team members to write. I say, please write because if you don't write about experience—

CTM: You don't reach other audiences, you don't get it into the public domain if you don't write.

FA: Now who invites me, is a lot of colleges, a law universities and other universities in Delhi, in Kolkata. Out of the blue people invite me, so I travel a lot for discussion for conferences, to teach the students, etc. And that is how I think our—and now we have a website, I don't deal with any of that but this website, and there is a regular intern program. So interns come and learn, and they take back that knowledge, they present papers on what they have learned, so that's the way information spreads. I'm seventy. It's time I retire, no?

CTM: There's no age, I think, that one needs to think of in terms of—the question is energy, nahi?

LEC: Yeah, it's energy.

CTM: It's always energy. So, does one go on? I see energy and passion. I don't see you retiring, Flavia, I mean come on. No. Maybe formally…

LEC: This is what inspires you; this is what makes you happy.

FA: This is what makes me happy. I was miserable, ten days I had to be in Bangalore…to tell you frankly.

CTM: So one question: have there been cases that you've dealt with or people you've dealt with having to do with Dalit issues…in Majlis?

FA: Not really. One of my colleagues has just written and to me and to my other colleague, saying that we started this sexual violence program…at that time it was new and today it's established and we've done great work…don't you think we should start something new today?...maybe Dalit issue, you know, and that we should take up in a very complete manner. And she said, can we discuss it early Jan?

CTM: Great, so next time we check in with you maybe there will have been a whole other stream of—

FA: And then you would have to interviewed my other colleagues who were bringing in these concerns and insights.

CTM: Absolutely. Well, that's wonderful. Thank you.

FA: Thank you for telling us that.

FA: So far it's been mainly violence and identity politics, but the whole issue of caste, and Dalit identity, those kinds of issues…

CTM: But those are part of those issues.

FA: You need to—

CTM: You need to develop in that direction it's just—so, what's been interesting actually, hearing you, is to get a very concrete sense…you are very locally grounded but you are also…the development of your thought and your work at every turn, the kinds of questions that you have asked that lead you to a very different space and to be an outsider in some form or the other at various moments, but then that leads you to a much larger understanding of what the issues are that you—or a more nuanced—

FA: I did some other things. I did bar dancer issue and then I presented a paper at Yale University and that's also published. It's about the issue of sexuality and erotica and the court space.

CTM: Ah, interesting.

FA: Yeah. That's a very interesting paper and people really like that paper, because I also question ourselves, how we looked at them as victims.

LEC: Yeah. I read that.

FA: Everybody looked at them as victims. But you know these girls are saying, "What's wrong with you, why are you writing this piece? I mean you could have earned much better money if you were in our profession. What is this boring thing you are doing?" So the way we looked at each other, it was so strange.

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And they'd say, "All these middle-class Maharastrian women, let them dance and earn money, no? Show us. They're wearing diamonds and all—their husbands money. They say 'easy money, easy money', so let them dance five, six hours and then get men to part with their so-called hard earned money and then we'll see, no. Then we talk about whether what is easy and what's not easy." [*Laughter*] It's amazing, their confidence and the way they would talk to us; make us realize how small we are in this, and the way it petered down, it was so sad. And all they wanted was an English medium education for their children. And then they had to pull them out and put them in sex work.

LEC: Wow.

FA: And their dancing is so fantastic! Better than Rekha, Sri Devi and all. Oh my god! Because they come these dancing communities. Just fantastic.

CTM: That's amazing. Well, that's another story for another day.

FA: That's another detour I did. As an when issues come up, like Babri Masjib came up, then we did something, secularism. Gujarat, we did...I did a small book on that.

They are all raped, and they come with bleeding vaginal injuries, splinters in their vaginas and all, but when you ask them it is always the next woman, not me. I have said, rape speaks through the tongues of dead women it's not me, never. That is such a poignant thing, I cannot tell you.

CTM: That's amazing.

LEC: That's praxis for you. Well you have been quite a structural agitator. Thank you. It's one thing to read you, it's something else to hear you talk about this.

CTM: Thank you. There's much more we can talk about, but we can't today.

LEC: This is invaluable.

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Feminist Freedom Warriors (FFW) is a first of its kind digital video archive and documentary project. Born out of an engagement in anti-capitalist, anti-racist struggles as women of color from the Global South, this project is about cross-generational histories of feminist activism addressing economic, anti-racist, social justice and anti-capitalist issues across national borders.