



## Nandita Shah

12/18/2016

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**LEC:** We're here - today is December 18<sup>th</sup> - with Nandita Shah. We're so very pleased to have you. We're actually thrilled that you can be here to do this with us. We're having this interview in Mumbai, where there's unbelievably beautiful traffic.

[Laughter]

**LEC:** I'll tell you about that later. So Nandita, as we said, these are just general kitchen table conversations about your own history through feminist work, practice, what brought you to this point and so tell us how you started to do this kind of work.

**NS:** You know, I – as a child I've always used to be interested in doing some kind of thing around taking up issues. So I would take up my servant's issue, I would take up my sister's issue. So within siblings I would be the one standing up for taking position and saying no that's not right and all that so it was there somewhere. And then there was actually I got into an architecture college and I decided not to continue and I went into social work and something happened and I just felt that that's not what I want to do and I would really like to spend time learning to be into social work. So I got into social work and then I became a Maoist for almost 4-5 years. I was in a very radical group for-

**CTM:** Four to five years? Huh.

**NS:** And I was...all through my student life. I was out of my student group.

**CTM:** And you were in Mumbai?

**NS:** Yes and I was - so I know all the people like PK and Gurbir and all from that time. When we were students and everybody was trying to woo you to be part of that group because you were still young and you hadn't formulated exactly which fraction

of the Maoist that you'd be part of. So it was that phase and in fact I went into the feminist movement and to this organization called Forum Against Oppression of Women to change their class perspective. So I was like –

**CTM:** Interesting.

**LEC:** So you went in with an agenda.

**NS:** Yes, I went in with an agenda. You know, it was very funny, the first time I landed up in the meeting, I was very young and I was always very vocal and everything so I go to this meeting and they're discussing how to protect the railway compartment from men entering it and not allowing the women to get down and the whole issue of sexual harassment and how do we talk about it. And they were saying let's protect the railway compartment and it was a whole huge campaign that was done which is how today we have 24/7 women's compartment in the railways, at that time it wasn't like that. So my first reaction was 'No no. We shouldn't only use women, we should involve men. Let's get everybody together.' Everybody's looking at each other saying 'Who is she?' You know, so [laughs] that was the beginning. And then it was a conversation with various feminists. That was one area that really got me interested and the second area was my experience of being in a Maoist group where I constantly felt that the issues that I was asked to handle as a woman, women's issues in slums, that there was no space to really articulate them, to bring them out. Even if I brought out issue they would not be given emphasis. So it was always about only getting them to be mobilized on a certain issue but if their issues are there then we may not take it up. That was very disturbing for me. So that was on one hand my personal sense of 'What am I doing there?' and then going to a feminist group and trying to understand what's happening there that actually got me to be more interested in feminism and then I decided that I wanted to study this whole understanding so I went to the Institute of Social Studies in The Hague and I did my Masters again in Women's Studies so that was the journey. Then when I came back another colleague of mine we go to work together on the women's movement which was exploring what are the kinds of trends in the feminist movement in India. And what we found – we actually came to – we began looking at can we see radical feminists, socialist feminists, Marxist feminists in India. That's how we began actually looking at over 35 organizations that we interviewed all over the country to see can we put them in a trend and we found that those kinds of divisions don't exist in India in such clear way. You could be a socialist feminist organization taking a radical stand on a particular issue and you go back to taking a very Marxist feminist stand on a particular thing. So these divisions that been very clearly articulated-

**CTM:** From western feminists.

**NS:** Through western feminism are not exactly working in our context. Then we decided to explore more about the issues and how various issues have been understood. So we looked at the entire issue of violence against women and how there are within even understanding of say for example something like rape. You have women's groups taking a stand that you should get the rapist to marry the woman he has raped to the people who are saying there should be capital punishment. So you have an entire range within this very broad women's movement framework. So we decided that that was more important for us to document. So it's a documentation from within being a part of the women's movement and even today it's used as a textbook, as one of the readings because there aren't many of that time so it's - it gives a different flavor to what was happening at that time.

**CTM:** Were you and Nandita Gandhi at the Hague together?

**NS:** No.

**CTM:** So you did the work after you came back?

**NS:** After I came back. I did my Master's and she was doing another project on anti price-rise movement.

**CTM:** I see.

**NS:** That was with ISS but she wasn't studying there but then we went to do our PhD-

**CTM:** That's what I thought because I thought that-

**NS:** The PhD was at the same time. Holland they have that kind of possibility that you take the same guides and take a similar framework and apply it separately so you come up with...so then that was much later. After the book and after a lot of..., after Akshara - much later.

**CTM:** Right. So talk a little bit about sort of your work over all these decades. It's been a while and sort of what do you feel have been major trajectories that you have engaged in. How do you reflect on some of your own work in the context of not just Indian feminist movement but also transnational because I know you've had a lot of, at least in recent past, a lot of connections with people in other countries and so on.

**NS:** After we wrote the book there were two kinds of thinking that was going on. One was that I'm part of an organization called Forum Against Oppression of Women which is where I'm going to influence them and then kind of stayed back. So that's a whole group of people who meet every week for the last 35 years.

**CTM:** Can you imagine?

**LEC:** Wow.

**NS:** And they are meeting. And even it could mean 5 people, 10 people, 20 people but there's a meeting that's happening almost every week. So that group's trajectory is slightly different and then we set up another organization and that trajectory's slightly separate and I talk a little bit about both. You just get a sense – So for me these two trajectories of Forum and Akshara, which is the organization we set up—slightly different and they bring different aspect of my own involvement and contribution in the process of building alliance, building new innovative ideas so it's different. Like the question that you asking, for me I think my being part of a political process earlier, being part of a Maoist group gave me a very sharper understanding of politics. It gave me the basis of Marxism in the broader sense and a certain kind of political sharpness, I feel, that has helped me subsequently in understanding sometimes what's not said, what's under the carpet, just a sense of it.

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**NS:** And I feel that that has been very much part of my being even now so I feel that I'm able to move different kinds of worlds because some confidence got built around understanding of things at that time. So in terms of Forum there's been a lot of different kinds of things that we've been able to do as women's movement contribution. One of the organizations that's seen as nonfunded not registered, consciously not registered and nonfunded organization that has been - to such an organization that has survived for so many years not taking any money. So everybody works somewhere else and they give their voluntary time and effort. Whenever we're doing anything money is raised separately. So through this organization we have been able to do almost every legislation that has come up. All of us have been part of that process of building that legislation and that can be from the rape amendments to dowry amendments to subsequently now in 2013 the law that has got around sexual assault. There has been a low engagement of the state in terms of demanding laws. There's also been a lot more effort at alliance building. So there will be Dalit movement engagement, to some extent Dalit women's movement but also general Dalit movement. So now we are quite actively participating with one of the kinds of movements that have come up in Gujarat how do we bring some of the understanding that we have to the larger Dalit question and it's more about us understanding also. So it's more reflective process it's not just out there to influence feminism but how can feminism bring the caste issue within its own analysis at every point in time. That's the process and Forum has also been involved like say for example after 2002 riots Gujarat we constituted an international committee to look into what had happened but the reason for it was that there is inner conflict. You cannot apply the same kind of

sexual assault legislation because you can never take that to court because in the conflict, situation is different. You cannot prove over certain kind of thing. So the idea is also to articulate what are the most kinds of processes that can give justice. What kind of gender justice can happen within conflict? And that entire experience has helped us even in refining the sexual assault whether aggrieved violence or aggrieved form of violence has been incorporated. So that has been the journey so it's, in that sense, trying to play that larger legal but a broader framework moving forward. Akshara we decided to set up as an organization one: because we felt that when he had gone to visit so many organizations one of the things lacking was a kind of resource, support organization. There were hardly anybody. At that time women's studies hadn't come up in the way it has come up now so we felt that we needed to play that role of being the bridge between the women's movement and women's studies and because we have like I had just come back from the Netherlands, we had just done a book together so we were constantly being seen as are-you-activist-or-are-you-academic. And our constant thing was that we don't have to be either. We can be activist researcher or activist academics. So somewhere the feeling was that we needed to build that bridge and that's how a resource center was formed. So we had - we came up with very innovative classification system. A feminist classification systems to have smaller collections being put together because we found that the Dewey system itself has a bias and we wanted to challenge that. So in a way we tried to bring feminism in all those other like library system and how do we critically look at how libraries are maintained so we did a lot of work around, a lot of articles around our critique of the Dewey system and now we're looking at say for example where will sex work go? Will it go in violence, will it go in work? Each thing that you do has a politics. So that was something that we worked on a lot but very soon we realized that a lot of time in the feminist movement we are being one: reactive and we are always doing things once the problem has emerged so like if it's women in distress, if it's domestic violence, it's rape. The act has already happened and we're trying to find a way. And that's very important and we're a part of that support group but we felt we needed to do something more preventive and more before it happened. So a lot of work that we're doing now is around the preventive zone or thinking about how can things be changed so what can be the engagement with systems that can challenge and change the equation that are there and then of course there are limitations of those challenges in the larger and neoliberal framework but that's been the framework but what can be our way of preventing and the second: some other thing is how do we really talk about the agency of the person.

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**NS:** So we came up with a lot of ways in which the agencies emphasize of the young person of the person who is survivor. Why do we say victims let's talk about survivors—all these terminologies are something we incorporated in much larger

ways and we started working with young people so that's been the emphasis now so we work with youth, we work with young girls and we very soon realize that we need to work with young men. So we couldn't only talk about empowerment with young girls in a coed situation. When you're working like we work in colleges, we work in undergrads' platform that you cannot talk only to girls you had to talk to both. So we came with a lot of methodologies of how to do communications with them so we organized like fairs, big fairs; 3000, 4000 people can come at a time, where we have turned around every game every play as a child to do an analysis or your life as a girl or a boy. So like sexual division of labor, so we challenge the whole sexual division of labor through a one minute game. So you play the game and you talk about why is it that there is a hesitancy to do certain kinds of work. So you have to be expert all work, both men's work and women's work and then only you can be a winner. And similarly for boys, why is there a hesitancy to do what work in the house? And then bring the whole discussion around sexual division of labor. So like that, we have about twenty, thirty games of this kind which we have done over the years and we take this to different spaces and now we're taking it in different parts of the country so we have kind of adapted it into urban, very fancy colleges to very poor neighborhoods like in slums to rural areas. So we've tried to adapt the whole methodology that how do you initiate a dialogue which is nonthreatening in the beginning for them to open up to the idea of gender equality. So then what happens in these kinds of spaces, they become then interested, say 'Oh I want to be part of this' and then it becomes like – they become members to certain kinds of spaces that we've created. We have what are called women empowerment clubs in different cultures. So then they become members of these clubs and they will take up the various issues that they see relevant. So one of - like just to give example is they took up – we do a lot of work around safety so they took up safety audits of their own colleges. So we gave them the methodology and said okay how can I make my college safe for both...for girls to experience and the boys are also a part of this group. And it was amazing the kind of stuff they came up with. Graffiti in the men's toilet where...what's happening in the canteens, whichever spaces that they find that women are not accessing. What's happening to the sports area, so sometimes it's not about you being harassed but you're just now allowed. You just don't feel comfortable going there so they started noting it all down and then we took all of that and each of the college gave it to their management and then we went along to see if management would implement some of these kinds of things. So we just feel that if we can give a framework for young people, I won't say that they'll totally change or anything but there's a lot of possibility of pushing those boundaries of control, of how they look at relationship. We have a lot of conversation around relationship.

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**NS:** It's very simple, when does love and control and power, where is the thin line? You're very happy as long as your girlfriend is in the same group but are you comfortable if she wears sleeveless, you have a little bit of a doubt so where is this whole thing about love and your nurturing relationship but where does it become part of control? So all those kinds of conversations, even conversations around sexuality, looking at contraception... which are the normal young peoples' concerns, we take up all of these and have conversations. So that's one of our big part of conversation and initiative with young girls and young boys and while we work with both of them together our whole emphasis is on how do you build young girls leadership, but in a mixed environment also, because young girls, when they start building their leadership, and is seen by young men together, it is easier to sustain. That is our experience. It is easier for them to sustain and then we tell the young girls also to take that leadership in their own neighborhoods. So we have a lot of projects in neighborhoods and slums where we help them to do community mobilize – I won't say community mobilization but it's how do you change the social norms of the community? How do you create the – how do you push the boundaries? So how do you push your boundary within yourself first, how do you push your boundaries within your families so whether it's – whether you should come back home at 7 o'clock. So how do you take that one step more and then what do you do in your own community to push those boundaries? And that has been a very interesting, very engaging process for the young people and also for us because it's such different things that come up every year. Like this year we are doing – you know, we have street newsstands in Bombay. It's a very, very popular Bombay thing that you will have newspaper like ten newspaper and a newsstand that's available on the street. Anybody can stop and read and not a single woman would actually stop and read. We did a survey of a hundred people and even interviewed some journalists, women journalists, and none of them had ever gone and stood at that stands and read. And nobody says you can't do it it's not –

**CTM:** But there's no level of comfort.

**NS:** Exactly. So we just took that up as a big campaign around why don't we claim that? So sports, like public spaces in terms of parks are something we've all done. We do Reclaim the Night, we've done a lot of those kinds of things. But how do we claim what are seen as very normal things in the city? So how do we claim these kinds of spaces? So our whole thing about claiming of public spaces and 'That city is mine' as a woman, as a girl, has to be there in your mind and it has to be seen by the society. So how do we build that? And that has been one major kind of grassroots mobilization and advocacy so how do you bring it to the level of the public. So we did a lot of young women and go to political parties and say 'Why can't do we do it?' so now for the election we are doing a young women's charter to see what are young women in the city demanding from our operators? Because the election is just right

around the corner. We're just trying to say that whatever organizing we do, the young women and young people need platforms to take it forward and if we can just create that platforms and create that access that they don't have so that then gives them the sense of agency and a feeling of 'I did something'. Like we've done that for stations, all the stations we've done safety audits. And those station audits then you go and give to the railway authorities. now it doesn't mean that the railway authorities have all done everything but a lot of things got done. A whole lot of people were engaged in painting the railway stations so a lot student initiatives of this kind have happened. So in the sense that I did safety audit at my college, I did safety audit at my station and there is some change I have seen and that we feel can bring them more closer to understanding of the role as a young person as citizen I can play and with than an understanding of gender equality. So we're constantly finding those spaces that can be done.

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**CTM:** Nandita, when did you start Akshara?

**NS:** We started Akshara in 1995.

**CTM:** '95. So it's been twenty plus years, now, right? And so what's interesting about what your saying is how much of it is about a certain kind of political education that you're doing, which doesn't actually happen in universities unless it happens through particular individuals in a classroom or something. So it's kind of—

**LEC:** It's building a broad based consciousness.

**CTM:** Right. Exactly.

**LEC:** Which is so crucial. This doesn't happen in colleges in the US.

**CTM:** And so in some ways what's interesting is also the refusal of the academic activist divide that you talked about earlier that allows you to actually just envision what is possible with-

**NS:** With the right that space.

**CTM:** Yeah, within those spaces and not feel like you have to be one, there or here and an NGO person or a professor on the other hand. So that—

**NS:** One aspect of education has been part of Akshara kind of streamline.

**CTM:** Right because I remember you used to do like media literacy, workshops and you've done a whole bunch of things like that over the years.

**NS:** What we've done over the years is one: there's this level of working education and mindset change with consciousness raising in different ways but we've also done,



which is actually quite different from many women's organization, is work with state and that has been a big kind of - we went through a lot of thinking and working and seeing what is that engagement going to look like and the worry that all of us has is the state is looking at you becoming an implementing organization.

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**CTM:** So Nandita you were talking about that you had made a choice to actually engage the state in a particular way. So talk about that but also talk about then the connections, your reflections on the other sort of connections with other movement and spaces.

**NS:** So we see the role of Akshara at level of change at the grassroots in terms of mindset, in terms of bringing that advocacy agenda and establishing citizenship and as women's right to citizenship but we also felt that we needed to ensure that state does not give up its responsibility towards services because right now the state is looking at everything from 'It's not my job. You do it'. So we don't want to be an implementing body but we want to make sure that the state does a certain kind of role and does it well so we began work around safety and around emergency response system. For us it's part of a prevention framework because we believe that that kind of prevention – it plays a preventive role if you create a set of services which are effective you can prevent certain kinds of problems. So we worked with the first engagement in a big way was setting up of an emergency helpline in Mumbai. So it's a separate helpline for crimes against women, children and senior citizens which we decided to support in training. So we train the police in making sure that they understand gender, that they are understanding whatever they need to do as a role and what it would mean to ensure that people know that this helpline exists. So we decided that we will actually take that one step more with the state so we demanded the 103 helpline. We took film star with us, we did a lot of things to ensure that that happens. Once it happens we took one more step to say 'okay we're going to make sure that it actually works and they won't give up' and it's been now eight years that it's working and we have about seven to ten minutes response time where somebody – a woman in crisis calls and the police actually arrive at the doorstep and we find that as an important preventive thing in a lot of cases the fact that wife who is going through domestic violence calls and the police arrives at that spot already sends a message to the man that this is not acceptable. It does play a certain level of preventive work. We're saying that that kind of engagement - the second kind of thing that we've done now which is also within a preventive frame work is we've done a lot of work with the department plan of Mumbai and we're saying if you have faulty design and faulty planning of how you create spaces, they are dangerous. And they itself will not only just talk about safety but it ensures segregation, it ensures so many discrimination and division that exists in the cities so we need to challenge that notion of how state will look at planning and design.

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**NS:** So these kinds of engagement, which are actually quite outside of what normally Akshara does, we decided to take these kinds of challenges to say we are going to engage with the police, we are going to engage with the planners who design the cities to say how can we bring about certain policy changes and third idea that we've done quite a lot of work is with transport. So we are trying to say that if we can find within the transport authorities and transport system, if there can be one or two areas where we could influence to ensure that sexual harassment is reduced for example in the bus. It doesn't mean that the entire transport system is free of violence and it doesn't also mean it's free of gender inequality understanding but in the bus experience sexual street harassment is something that we could take up. So we decided to target the conductors and we worked with the entire authorities to see if the conductors can play a role of prevention. If he can actually take up the case if something happens and if we can create a way in which a woman feels that if the conductor is with her certain amount of preventive measure can happen. So we work with the authorities for 2-3 years to ensure the role of conductors is expanding to include prevention of sexual harassment because otherwise their role is just to issue the tickets and they are not bothered or even if they see something they'll just ignore it. So we've decided that we need to take that kind of thing up. So now we have 100% of conductors getting this rule card, rule card is pasted in the bus and every depot has certain kinds of processes to ensure that conductors get this message, that they have to play this role in prevention. So we're just trying to engage the system in these kinds of ways to find a gap and to say how can we make things turn around. What will work that will actually ensure that the experience that women have of that use of that service is better. So that's the kind of thing but while doing that there's always this danger of cooption. How do we institutionalize this process is a big challenge but then when we are institutionalizing how do we ensure that we're not just coopted in that process. We're very conscious of that and we, with that consciousness, are still saying that as women's movement we need to put that pressure on. We need not to allow them to just get away because we've always been outside, so we need that outside space to be the pressure group but we also need to do some amount of engagement so that's been the shift that we have made and the other area that we've been very consciously attempting and attempted in the last - I think 2003 so almost 10-15 years, which is how do we build alliance with the other social movements and that happened with the World Social Forum. So one was what kind of processes we can do within India that would allow better dialogues amongst various movements. We felt that it is not some broad issue we didn't come together, some big issue people will come together, but it's with a lot of mistrust that people come together on a minimum agenda. So we said how can we create a better dialogue that happens between us and how do we create an overall sense of another world is possible which

is what the slogan of the WSF was and we even made it into another word of agenda just as we were discussing. So that was the idea that the feminists brought about so once we got different movements together it was trade union movement, Dalit movement, women's movement, sexuality movement so WSF has gave us a platform to not become one voice and not to have one continuous agenda because then everybody gets a little bit wary about who's leading.

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**NS:** So it created a platform to allow all these people and all these voices to come and in a much more open way listen to each other. It wasn't that we came together for this thing so I'm going to discuss other thing and that really actually opened up a lot of spaces for organizations', movements' to dialogue. And we tried to do that also at the transnational level so we felt that we needed to get feminists across from transnational feminist groups to come together. So we had formed a network of 12 feminist organization from Articulacion Feminista Marcosur in Latin America to FEMNET in Africa to DAWN which is international so lots of organizations we came together in the WSF process and we set up what are called feminist dialogues. So it was a two-day , three-day before event before the WSF for feminists to come together and talk about strategizing and where are the bottlenecks? So how do we look at globalization and our challenges? How do we look at militarization and where are we in relation to understanding in terms of strategizing? So all these different kinds of engagement and issues were taken up. Understanding of how 'body' is so essential in our own analysis and how do we bring that, even on a WSF platform. And then I also decided to become very active in the International Counsel because we felt that you couldn't push for feminist agenda unless you became active in the overall agenda. You couldn't just take one agenda and push for it. You had to push for the whole one. So a lot of time was given...in fact, my PhD book couldn't happen because I got involved in the World Social Forum and didn't put the time for what it would take to just put it together. So I think that that whole process of coming together has been very enriching for all of us as even feminists in India because we – this kind of larger exposure not just for me but for a lot of people who were involved in this process was really very refreshing, very different and very different from the UN spaces that were there, you know because we were all part of Beijing and then we were part of other process but this became an agenda that we were deciding, we were determining and carrying it forward and had a very clear political understanding of strategy so that was an important point and during the World Social Forum we also as feminist movement came up with the concept of inter-movement dialogue. So it was the feminists who led the inter-movement dialogue at WSF. So we got all the movements together on one platform and actually talk on various issues.

**CTM:** And what years are we talking about?

**NS:** 2004, '05, '07, '09, '11.

**CTM:** Okay.

**NS:** '11 was the last dialogue and after that...the engagement with World Social Forum and where it's happening has been a little difficult but till then we were doing these kinds of things so even - like say for example we had La Via Campesina, which is one of the largest platform talking about violence against women and why is it that they are not able to take up? We even had the CUT which is one of Brazil's larger labor movement to say why is it that they cannot take up abortion issue and what is it they can do to take up abortion issue? So the bottlenecks, to understand each other's bottlenecks but how do you overcome them? So it's not enough to say okay I have my working class only predominantly conservative and so it's difficult for me to take - but what is that you can do as a process? So these kinds of conversations were possible, in fact. Via Campesina domestic violence as one of the major issue as we are—I don't say just because of the inter-movement and there are many processes but these processes do help in taking up certain kinds of understanding, opening up to creating a safe environment in which to have dialogues.

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**CTM:** So what have been the challenges?

**NS:** Challenges?

**CTM:** Yeah, like what were some key - not just this - but in the work you've done?

**NS:** Biggest challenge is how do you follow through? You have conversations, you meet, you come up with - so one level of learning is that you sharpen your own understanding and sharpen your own understanding as movement but at the international level what is it that we are able to do and that's true of a lot of international coalitions that are being built like on the war. Can we actually do something? On so many such issues we found that you're able to come to understanding, you have a voice but are you able to shift it and there is always that gap that I feel is the big challenge.

**LEC:** One of the things that I see that I find interesting in relating to challenges is I find really interesting that World Social Forum - I mean WSF has always has a way of trying to bring all these groups together, like you were just saying, to talk across differences to understand what is preventing or what can bring them together in some kind of shared understanding on a particular political project or understanding of their countries - how can we work across borders? So WSF does a good job of that in having discussions about it. What I'm always left thinking is when you think of people as individuals or even as groups, organizations in particular countries, what is

it they need to do - to as in the cases of your groups here in India, what is it they need to do to work across borders? Because we have shared goals and sometimes even have work together like in WSF. But what is it they need to do to be able to work across borders, across nation states to build solidarities so that we have – you see, we see capital doing it in so many ways like what they are marketing in the United States, they're marketing in Sri Lanka or – they know how to do it. What is it that prevents us from doing it?

**NS:** But you know with the WSF a lot of – say for example the labor movement they were able to – because it was so concrete that you were demanding a certain kind of wages from a particular employer and that employer is employing people in another area at a lower rate, a higher rate and all that but those linkages actually happen a lot after the WSF—a platform like CUT got into with Indian counterparts here and have not just dialogue but a concrete strategy plan as to how you're going to oppose this particular policy that is coming up. So those things have been there and if you look at the feminist movement we used to do that a lot around health movement earlier globally because a lot of injectable contraceptives, a lot of those kinds of things were done. But unless we're able to identify that people against whom we are doing a certain thing. It's been difficult because the whole thing is our state itself is so dissipated now with globalization coming in. You're not just fighting the state you're fighting so many different larger game plan that it's way difficult to mobilize only around any one group of people. That's also been the transnational challenge. Who are you fighting against and how do you articulate that particular idea? So militarization was still a possibility in terms of looking at militarization in each part of our country and increase of defense budget but we've not been able to make an impact out there. That's the challenge.

**LEC:** In light of that what do you see as a way forward for all of our disparate groups in different countries, including yours here? How do we move forward?

**NS:** I personally feel that we really need to have these inter-movement spaces both within the movement that we're a part of – like right now we have a lot of those kinds of things happening in India. We have the young Dalit students' movement that has brought a lot of us together in a different way. We have the Dalit assertion movements like you see in Gujarat in other parts that have potential of bringing together and we also have the sexuality movement which is gaining much more momentum. And feminists are very much part of all the processes. So that is one definite possibility that we could bring some of these inside but I still don't think that feminists are – feminist politics is so mainstream in any of them. Not – forget the leadership part but even in terms of their political analysis, it's not that feminist principles are so clearly central to any of these. Unless we are able to bring that—

**LEC:** That is the problem.

**NS:** That is the challenge.

**LEC:** We can look at different places in the South and we see the same thing.

**CTM:** And the North.

**LEC:** And the North yeah. That is a problem.

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**NS:** And then the other side of it is this whole thing about ‘Oh this is a post-feminist area... that you’ve already got it all... women are there what are you talking about’. So you have all this whole backlash also happening at the same time. We’re facing a lot of those kinds of challenges of backlash. In fact, we had a very interesting seminar we did with the MenEngage. We’re now also doing a lot of work with MenEngage nationally and internationally. To say that as feminist voices we need to engage with men who are working with men. We shouldn’t just let it be their project. We need to interact. We need to engage and challenge even within those spaces to say how are they looking at power? How are they challenging power? And how are they looking at creating spaces for leadership, for challenging the status quo and patriarchy? So over the years we’ve looked at the whole issue of backlash and one of the questions that we were asking is why are men who are working with men on gender equality not answering the backlash? Why does it have to be women’s movement job to answer backlash? And why is it that if those voices get strengthened, we don’t have to do the backlash fight because-

**LEC:** There’s some small men’s groups in the States, African American men’s groups that’s been doing that. For years it hasn’t had kind of follow through impact but yeah some men’s groups, African American men’s groups in the US will be doing that. A huge challenge as they’re getting men to – they’ve been doing that.

**NS:** There are lots of groups have coming up now so it’s a new - new donor agenda.

**CTM:** oh, it’s a donor agenda?

**NS:** A lot of it is donor—not to fight against women but to fight for them.

**LEC:** But the interesting thing about that—

**NS:** It’s a new trend now. A lot of money from the women’s rights work is going to men working to change men.

**LEC:** Yeah, because there’s been a recognition and to the credit of the donor organizations that this is a foundation in patriarchy. And you have women who have patriarchal thinking but men have patriarchal power. So in asking what is your work,

how is your work going to change society and how is your work going to change men's thinking is where that came from.

**NS:** That's true and we were appreciative of that but the challenge that we're facing is that it seems as either/or, which is –

**LEC:** The problem.

**NS:** The money that needs to go because problem is not solved. Women are still fighting domestic violence. So yes, men need to change but it cannot be without providing the kind of services that are required, the kind of things that need to be done. So that's one problem and the second problem that we are finding is that a lot of times the men's groups' articulation is also coming from this understanding that the difference that we recognize within the women's movement, that we are all different. We challenge the notion that all women are the same. We recognize a difference and we recognize the power and privileges among women. We did that, you know with postmodernism, the differences, we recognize it. What men's group, what some of them are doing is to extend that to say there's a difference between men and women and like you have power and privilege within women, you have power and privilege between women and men. And we're saying that it's not the same continuum and that is a very big challenge. This continuum is not that women are the one and men and the hegemonic masculinity is of the other. It's different parts and that is a big challenge that has to be faced.

**LEC:** And that becomes additional work for women's groups because then we have to beg them to listen.

**NS:** So like us we're working with men from a feminist organization. Now we're working also with men's groups who are engaged in a different way. So you're kind of getting spread so that is a very big challenge and the group like Forum are not interested.

**CTM:** No, no, no. We don't need to deal with that.

00:50:21

**NS:** But somewhere we felt, me and my colleague, that we don't have an option. We must engage because otherwise this whole articulation is going to be without that feminist lens and that feminist lens is critical if any work is going to happen with men otherwise men can change and tell their wives you better change and that's no impact. So we need to engage and bring those critical questions in those debates and it's to their credit, they're allowing that space. Whoever's willing to engage, we've pushed ourselves and we were there in a core group of MenEngage in international conference. So we are pushing and they are saying 'okay please welcome' so we just

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*Linda E. Carty and Chandra Talpade Mohanty*  
*in conversation with Nandita Shah*

have to see - but how much time? How much time should we engage and what should be the priority? That is a challenge that is constantly what we want to look at.

**CTM:** Well, this has been amazing.

**LC:** Thank you.

**CTM:** So much more to talk about.

**NS:** So many things, yeah!

**CTM:** I know. Well but this may be – for now, for now.

**NS:** Next time, yes.

**CTM:** Thanks a lot.

**LEC:** Thank you, this was really good.

**NS:** Thank you very much.

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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.*