Nimmi Gowrinathan

11/22/19

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CTM: So we are delighted, Nimmi, to have you with us today. This is Nimmi Gowrinathan, today is the 22nd of November, I believe. And welcome to this conversation! So we want to begin maybe by asking you to talk a little bit about…sort of what brings you to the kind of feminist activist and scholarly work or scholar activist work, however you define it. So anything from whatever aspects of your genealogy that makes sense to you, that you've kind of reflected on as significant for the work that you now are doing or are engaged in.

NG: First I'm very happy to be a part of this. I was thinking on the elevator that…I was going up to *Chandra Mohanty's* apartment! And I was just reflecting on the idea that they say you shouldn't meet people that you admire or heroes. And, I think that's true a lot of the time, but I think getting to meet some of the women, who's theorizing, shaped my own thinking. And also being able to connect here, your activism has been incredibly impactful at this stage for me. My work, I think, began from a place that I didn't think about it as either activism or political work. It was just something that I had to do. And it started with working with young kids in California, actually kids who were kept out of summer camp because they had HIV and somebody brought the project to me.

And I started working with these young kids when I was 14 or 15. And then eventually I went back to Sri Lanka and we had the idea that we could use some of these experiences in the US and do a leadership camp for young women there. Our parents had left, and we hadn't gone back really. And for me, that summer—which is through a program called Visions—was that moment where all of the pieces in your life sort of…fall together in a way that's still fractured, but is, is moving in a direction. And from that point on my project was to work for the Tamil people in whatever capacity I could. And it was clear that it was actually on behalf of Tamil women that I could do the most.

NG: To reflect on that now…how many times over the years I've had to disguise that this is actually my work. In different spaces…to be able to say that that is the project, the project is the Tamil cause it always has been. But I think throughout the course of my career, that's been hidden for a lot of reasons.

CTM: But where did you grow up?

NG: I grew up here. I grew up in California, but I mean, I always think I grew up in the village in Sri Lanka because our parents kept us outside of American society and we grew up really only with Sri Lankans. We weren't allowed to go to high school dances. We weren't allowed to engage with Americans. They were just different and we didn't—we had all of the culture, we had all of the community, it just wasn't tied to the country. They didn't talk about the country, but this was our world on the weekends, Sri Lankans, Sri Lankan children, Tamil food, studying Tamil music. That's how I grew up in California.

LEC: Hmm. So why do you think you, I want to go back to that point you made, that you for different reasons you have chosen to not make the point that *this* is the project you're doing, working on the Tamil women. Why do you think you need to do that? Or what is it that has made you—

NG: I think at different stages for different reasons, and this is also very…part of the focus was education, that one had to get the highest level of education. That was always without question. And in doing so in that kind of appeal to higher education and a kind of success in that sense I was forced into during my PhD to behave, I suppose, as if I was objective. And that initially they did tell me. Early on one of the advisors said that "you can't study Sri Lanka because you wouldn't be objective and this is political science", so there are probably other disciplines that would have offered more space for that. But this was political science. So, in that space suddenly activist was a bad word. So I would hide the work I was doing. Initially in 2004, I was in grad school and the tsunami happened.

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NG: And then it was like, I was suddenly given this brief reprieve to work on the Tamil. Because of this sort of humanitarian heart tugging moment the professors were like, "oh yeah, you should go back and do that." And I had, I actually was doing really intensely political work then, but I went back and I left grad school for those three months. Later I think as I wanted to work on behalf of the Tamils, again, in a different sense, in the policy world and the human rights world, my objectivity was constantly questioned. I mean, there would be moments where we were all trying to get the UN and others to recognize the massacre happening in 2009. And there would be somebody in the room who would say, well, "a document was leaked to a UN reporter. Was it you who did it?"

So that my ability to sort of hold that space at a moment that was so critical, to get some aid into this population was also dependent on me creating some space from this as a cause. As something that I was connected to. And then I think in general, in activist spaces, nobody knows where Sri Lanka—nobody knows about the Tamil cause. Even when you're talking about donors and funding, like these are not places of interest. So it was much easier for me to take something else and make it about the Tamil cause. A donor who wanted to build wells and have it go to that region, or somebody who was interested in militarization and take that conversation back, then it was for me to start with that as, as out front.

CTM: So you're right. There isn't a lot of knowledge about the Tamil cause and about their history in this country or—it's there in South Asia and it is there in a lot of other parts of the world, so maybe spend five minutes or so just kind of describing how you sort of what would you say if you were to describe sort of the genealogy of what has happened and how you define it now, the challenges and thinking this through.

LEC: And thinking this through, I want to say that why I said *this* country is because I spent most of my young life in Canada.

NG: Yeah.

LEC: And we were very much aware of it in the education system as well.

LEC: I went to grad school with women who were Tamil. It's not foreign, it's this country and other parts of the world who don't know about the cause. That's particularly why I wanted to go back to that question. And then your point about objectivity and political science is happening still. And it's amazing considering there's no value in neutral knowledge. So who were the objective?

CTM: And in 2019, you would think that these were questions that we had, in fact, addressed in a lot of other disciplines we certainly have done.

NG: You have. Absolutely. But I had a student a year ago or two years ago at Yale who called me and said that she—I was working with her on a paper on sexual violence in Sri Lanka. And they didn't think it was valid, for actually two appalling reasons. One, sexual violence was not *the most* significant aspect of conflict and two, that she was Tamil. And so that thesis was questioned on that basis. I—completely out of my mandate in any sense at all—I wrote to the professors there also and said, I cannot believe you're still doing this to students. I think also the, the Canada connection, similar to the UK and other places, those are…what both of you studied of course the pathways of migration.

NG: And so the ones who came here, the US, allowed in sort of the doctors and lawyers and a much more professional class whereas Canada had much more open immigration policies at that time. And still today, of course, I'm in the UK as well. Even that was quite new for me when I started visiting Tamil communities in Europe and Canada and other spaces, that was the first time off of the island that I understood some of the complicated ways in which class was working. Because the ones here…we had grown up in a particular middle-class understanding of what this was. But Tamil [inaudible] to me particularly now is, should only be understood as part of a global repression of these communities and how this is sort of reinforced by both the Sri Lankan state, the global systems…all of that.

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In its history, I think it's mimics any of the colonial post-colonial states where the British came in and there was a Tamil minority and the Tamil minority was placed in the position of power when they left purely because the minority, was roughly at that time 20%...the majority was Sinhalese Buddhist. And there was a population of Tamil Muslims as well, that was around 3%. And that when the British came in, they placed Tamils in positions of administrative power and purely because the Tamils spoke English. It's because of the proximity to India, there was a kind of missionary moment there where English was taught. And so obviously when the British left and left without any proper provisions in place, there was a lot of backlash towards that and that kind of slow exclusion, they weren't allowed at universities and changing the national language.

And I think what a lot of people miss that is that during those years post-independence, there was a peaceful protest. There were 20 years of peaceful protest. So these folks now who are like, why not nonviolence? Well, they tried that for 20 years. Then the guerilla movement emerged around the 1980s around the riots. And it grew very quickly, and there was different guerrilla movements. But in the end, the Tigers became the most prominent movement. And then over 30 years, they fought for a separate state, for a Tamil state. A big part of the movement was women, relatively early on, fighting. I think there was a stage at which when 9/11 happened, up until that

point there was this language around freedom fighters that crossed Latin America, and I think the Tigers fell into that.

NG: They certainly worked with all the other movements that were seen as freedom fighters. I'm not sure they fully gauge the impact of 9/11 as a lot of movements didn't. Once that language shifted and the movement became a terrorist movement, and was picked up in Europe and other places as such, it gave the state that sort of second layer of support to repress this movement and this population. And so in 2009, it sort of all came to a head and with the backing of unlikely allies Pakistan, Israel, India, China. Really everybody endorsed what happened in the end. There was just an all-out assault and the Tigers were destroyed. And there is in those six months, probably a hundred thousand Tamils that were killed. It sort of became very quickly this lessons learned, that we were going to do a study at the UN about what happened. But really in the end, all of those people were accountable and they sent off their administrative minions to other countries like Myanmar where the same thing happened…and nothing was learned from it.

NG: So now they're living under military occupation and just this week, the military general, who ordered forced abductions, who ordered this kind of massacre has been elected president. And that's sort of where, where the cause is today. Yeah. So now we're actually like viscerally dealing with activists who in the past four years have come out, been a little bit more political, engaged…had actual protests and now they're all looking for asylum.

CTM: It's like, what's happening in India now.

LEC: It's like, he came in, just elected to…just finish them off. That's what people have been talking about.

NG: And they did, they're not even…they're not even trying. The announcement of the presidency was made only in Sinhalese. Usually they pretend, and they put Tamil on the bottom now. So it's hard on the island to think about resistance because it seems almost impossible. But outside the Island, there is, there's always been a very powerful voice in the diaspora. For me, I see this younger generation as more energized than I've seen in the past 10 years. So there is something outside that feels possible.

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CTM: Hm it's what feels, it feels like with what's happening with Kashmir too, that the Kashmir diaspora, especially in the younger diaspora has really mobilized and fields accountability. Yeah…

NG: I mean, that being said, there is some incredible political work happening on the Island itself. But when they ask you for advice, what are you supposed to say, like…keep doing the work and get killed? Or maybe we just have to shut it down for a little bit? I don't want to advise these young women, even from India, actually, a woman contacted recently about the sexual violence case that was going to the court and she asked advice, should I stay, or should I leave? And I think in this political moment everywhere, my advice is to leave. These are increasingly brazen states. They don't care about shooting [inaudible].

LEC: And because of U.S. global hegemony, it's almost an unspoken solidarity that they feel that they have with crazy leadership here. So things that in other countries people would think about not doing, maybe they get some kind of support or some other parts of the country get support from the US state. They have to be a little bit hesitant. Now it's like all at war, because of what's happening in the anti-immigrant thinking and policy. And so, and it's all about people of color. So they're gonna support the Tamil struggle? *all shake head* Yeah, yeah, yeah. No, they feel that they can, so the new president will of course feel he can do whatever he wants. I mean, look at Modi, look at others who have gotten more brazen since Trump won.

CTM: Yeah, absolutely. So Nimmi, when you think about your work as a feminist over the last decade, what are the things that you kind of hope have contributed to the struggles that you have really cared about or cared about? What are the kinds of things that you that you would like to see your work contribute to and that it has contributed?

NG: I think the work that I do now came out of feeling as if there was 15 years of a career that failed, in some sense. And I think that's okay to say to younger women activists. That in those 15 years I was working at a relatively high levels in the policy world, human rights world, the UN, the academy. And the position of Tamil women was worse than it had been 15 years before, which is not to say that an individual is going to change that. But it was to say that that all of these various ways that we intervene into the lives of women, poke and prod and try and save them. We're unable to grapple with the politics that these women had.

And every space that I was in it just at some point, they depoliticized these women. At some point neutralized them. To me, what was left then to do is to think about how do we re-politicize not only, I mean, not the women because they are politicized. But how do we force their politics into some of these spaces and in the moment that we are now, I don't think that can be done overnight. No, I feel that this moment now is one in which we have to dismantle certain things first. So of course in every lecture, there will be some policy student asking what's the solution? That's not, that's not my role and that's not where we are. First, it's to acknowledge these various systems that are holding us captive.

Both internally and externally. And how do you break free from that? Otherwise sometimes it feels a bit like, I don't know. I mean, I was in a conversation recently at Columbia at SIPA, and there was a Middle Eastern expert policy guy, well-meaning white liberal, but these ideas of well, obviously democracy is the best form. And in reality, democracy is being used as a guise to cover up all kinds of violence. And so, yeah, this is not, I'm not going to hold on to your language anymore. I don't want to have to do that. And I don't want this next generation to have to do that. I don't want to listen to you when you say empowerment because it doesn't mean anything. You've not, you've stripped it of it's politics. And again, I don't have the language on the other side because we haven't evolved to that point in the movement yet.

But at least this initial language is initial captivity has to be broken. This inability to understand the politics of women. Just this week, there was an editor from a relatively big publication who we had suggested an essay about—I don't know if you saw Mona Eltahowy's—she has a book Seven Necessary Sins. And she said on television that "how many rapists do we have to kill for women to stop being raped?" And it's a huge outcry, they pulled the video and it's going to parliament. And people said that she was inciting violence. So, but then of course the reaction to it is just kind of like, well, fuck the patriarchy! Which is not useful in any real sense in how I think about the world. So what we had suggested was that a colleague of mine who has worked with incarcerated women here and myself and in battlefields with female fighters is an actual thoughtful piece on why women kill. What are the reasons?

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And this editor felt entitled to write back that these were two separate groups of women, women who killed abusive spouses and women who joined terrorist movements. He could see no analysis or argument connecting these two. Therefore, the piece itself was not valid, right? So to me, it's this divide. And of course I wrote back right away to explain why he was fundamentally wrong about both, but these false silos and divides, those are the ones that have to be broken apart. If you can't see that a woman who kills an abusive partner in this country has a political consciousness to what she's doing and understanding of why she felt she had to take up arms. And if you can't say that women joined militancy movements out of both a fear of sexual violence and a desire for a separate state or whatever, for freedom, then you've completely missed how gender operates. And that to me is becoming the biggest problem that we face as these people trying to keep us—really trying to keep women of color in their place in a different way.

LEC: That's all about the entrenched and intransigent, patriarchy, and how they think about women globally. And then when you add race and ethnicity to it, we are the easiest to dismiss, be dismissed and dispose of. So changing that is a challenge here for us. Doing feminists worker, women of color, same kind of thinking, same kind of blockages, but they're looking at women who are under siege, that compounds it, their actions combined.

NG: I think what I realized now, working with students, it's part of my struggle is that my introduction to this work was largely with female fighters. So that kind of urgency of violence now and a battle field, it distills political thinking in a particular way, because you don't have the time to debate all these things. And so now I think in these spaces inside movements where they are a points getting to a point of paralysis now in these discourses of who occupies what political space and where identity follows and all of this, sometimes for me, it's very frustrating. I feel there's work to be done. Yes, there are things that we have to work through internally and we have to process, but once you get stuck in that space, that you can never connect to anybody that you can never. And this to me is really the beauty of working on the Tamil cause is that I had to come into all of these spaces ready to learn from Black women, from women in Columbia, from other spaces, because nobody cared about my cause. So my role was to take this information back to the movement. No, and that's, that's how I hope that young people now start to think like your role is to, is to have your costs, but to take all of this as something that contributes.

CTM: So this is a great segue into asking you about the Beyond Identity space, the thinking behind it and what you see, the work that political work contributing in this, at this moment here in this country too, or in New York. And I would like to add an extension to that because it made me think about beyond identity so that this trajectory has brought you to beyond identity. It's so important in doing this work here and you outlined what I hear as a strategy outside of those formal structures, how to get the young women in Sri Lanka to understand Tamil women, to understand that strategy maybe as a way forward. So how do you connect those two? Or do you connect those as strategies for them to move forward? Because whenever we meet your students here, it's unbelievable. They're thinking it's about tomorrow.

NG: [Inaudible], I think when I left the academy myself and a lot of other, like all of the women of color, I went through the academy with left the academy and they went into I finished in 2011. Okay. So recently. I took, because I left to do movement work and others, like, it took a bit longer, but I think there was always a kind of guilt there, about doing that because I, myself didn't see that as my side of struggle, I didn't want to be in some poly side department meeting, arguing over, I don't know, a job hire, it just, wasn't my side of struggle, but I also knew that I

had, I had left all those women of color without somebody like me or my colleagues who all left the academy.

NG: So I think Beyond Identity started as a way for me to be comfortable in the academy myself first, not as an, in a department, not, um, beholden to anybody's sort of expectations of what I produce and how, and of course that needs private funding. And that's what we did, but the program could only have been at city college. Um, I always said, I wouldn't teach if it wasn't in the third world and say colleges for a lot of reasons, but it's, it's a beautiful sort of energetic activist space. And this history of supporting immigrants and when the opportunity for funding came was that a moment where I was doing work across the country, but really trying to get people to understand the politics of violent women in different ways. Through a series of Guernica magazine, through film, through lectures.

And what happened alongside those extras was that I was watching young women of color fracture at a moment that seemed really unfortunate where we really needed a deep movement building effort. Which has never the work that I had done in this country. I had never been an organizer here. I've always supported work happening elsewhere. and I saw the sort of smaller and smaller identity boxes. That you weren't Muslims, you don't understand you're not queer. So you don't understand one particularly difficult session about Mia and that she suddenly became anti-Black. And it was very difficult for me to understand these conversations. So when the opportunity for funding came, I thought, there must be a way that we can give these young women at city college, a from my own personal political project, when I was in these spaces in DC and other places, we were talking about Syria, we were talking about female fighters.

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I was the only woman of color in the room here. We have these young women who had just come from Aleppo or from Somalia or from where the violence is not just inside them, but it's in their families, it's in their homes. They're the ones who should be contributing to these conversations. And also in doing that work, I believe that one could transcend these lines of superficial identity. Because to do that work, you have to go into your identity all the way into it, into your community. It's you cannot be, I am there for I'm oppressed. No, you have to understand it. And so the theory was that we could do identity driven research, which is to say, why do you study what you study? Like go do the work into your community, into the history is a struggle that came before you.

And to marry that with political writing, because there were so many young women who were so talented and in so many great ideas, they couldn't articulate it. And now I think that's expanded a bit. I mean, as you both know, you have a vision for a political project, and then you have what emerges from that. And I think that's what one has to do. And political work is to keep evolving around that. Now it's clear to me that political expression for these, um, students could look like a lot of things. It could be writing. It could be art. A lot of them are very talented and things like, uh, recording sounds and other things. But for me, the articulation is important that you articulate a political project and that in the second year they would do over the summer, they would do research, which in itself was again a sort of fraught project in the Academy because we don't believe that young people can do research, or, or can be trained in it.

They went back to their—when you're going back to your identity, I found most often they went back to their mothers. Because you've spent so much time moving away from your mother and a kind of particularly inside the culture, inside the community. But then when you're starting to grapple with what identity is, what politics and gender and your community is, you have to go back to her. To find those answers in there. Some of the research they produced was incredible. The questions have been incredible. At the end of that two years, in the second year they do

movement building. And the second year they take more control of their own political project and continue with writing the pieces. Ideally for me, after a couple of years, they leave with a clear lyrical(political) project.

So as opposed to the 15 years, I spent creating a political project in opposition to the world, they enter the world and wherever they're going to go, NGO's, PhDs, with a clear sense of what their political project is and a body of work to support that. Um, but at the very least they leave and they feel like they're not crazy, and that has to be part of, of what we give them. Um, but the struggle on the other question you're asking about the female fighter work and the work over there is that one only has limited political energy, isn't it? So you're constantly sort of pulled between the political work you want to do, and the political work of bringing, the next generation with you. And how does one sort of resolve that tension? But in both spaces, the work is the same.

It is pushing people to understand, um, the distinctive politics that you don't agree with of these women. The ones here and the ones there. And I think we've seen, you've met the students and they are still struggling with a lot of these questions. Because a number of reasons, I think social media and other factors have created a kind of world that I don't fully understand. Political discourse. Um, but to do that work into like different connections to this country, to this land and immigrant versus a minority here. And to start to be able to feel that one need not think about it as seeding political space to embrace, um, violence that somebody else is experiencing because the through line is the same, isn't it? That'll take time. But I think at the very least, we're able to constantly disrupt their notions of, what women of color can do.

And I think because the space exists so many women of color, I know who left the Academy for the same reasons I did have come back to teach. And they came back just because of this space. So they've gotten to learn from me and I can design me and [inaudible], and all of these women who have come back because of the explicit political nature of this. And so I think when you spend so much time being afraid of making something explicitly political, but then when you put it out there as such, um, the power, it has to mobilize people. Instead of just doing some sort of, well, we should have inclusion of people of color and political science. But just going all out and saying, yes, all these women coming in have PhDs, they do, but their novelists and their op-ed writers and their artists, and that's a valid political expression, too.

CTM: So it's interesting because the pedagogical aspect of this project with the young women of color, who are students at city college. In different campuses?

NG: Only City College, in Harlem.

CTM: Okay, so I can see how the pedagogical aspect kind of can create a politics of alliance and solidarity among them. So I guess I'm curious about how you see the work you do in relation to other women of color and women from the Global South, what have been some of the challenges there in creating alliances and solidarities and ability to kind of speak politically with people who stand behind you and with you, what have been those challenges?
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NG: I think because of the nature of my work…there's one side of it that gets at some of the regular sort of white feminist tensions. There's one side of it that that's necessarily going to challenge that, but there's the other aspect of women who are violent. And once you introduced violence, it sort of unearths an entirely different of challenges because of the attachment to

nonviolence in different ways. I think has been probably the greatest challenge that even those who, who are allies intellectually and theoretically, to the work, have a difficult time moving outside of the binary of condemning or condoning violence. I think even in this country today, it hits a particular nerve. Isn't it? I mean, this editor, the real issue is that he didn't want a piece about why women kill cause it's uncomfortable.

The attachment in this country to guns, the attachment in this country to, there is this exceptionalism around guns and women. You can have a guy who's a good guy, who rapes women. Sometimes you can have a, guy's a good guy who shoots people sometimes, but these are the things that are kind of an exceptional. The reality is it's going to happen in this country. Black women are taking up arms, that women will be armed here. And so it's that part of the work that I find people struggle with a little bit. And that's okay, because I think that, that I won't be forced into this condone or condemn because in the end it doesn't matter. What do you do? It's simply a political reality for the women that I work with.

I think even in when you're publishing a book, let's say, I think one of the biggest ways that one can gauge how your work is received is the publisher is trying to decide the audience that will absorb it. I was speaking to a Palestinian poet the other day and I asked her how she was, she has a number of different identities that she's grappling with. She's Haitian and she's French and she's…and I said, I find it very difficult in even in the publishing world that they feel a need to put women of color in a place, now on a bookshelf, in their imagination…is it a darker Roxanne Gay? No, it's not. It's next to the books on political violence. We all struggle with, I think very similar challenges and the limitations of white feminism. But even amongst feminist from the Global South violence becomes a very difficult.

LEC: That's the role of patriarchy now with capitalism, is that gets to the heart of women's place as they are perceived that there's a place for them. And that place has nothing to do with violence. And while it's violence, that's putting them in that place. So women are socialized not to fight. That's why you have so much sexual violence, in this country and around the world. What happens to women—nobody, they have been socialized not to talk about it, not to acknowledge that it's happening and not to fight back. That's something that I teach a lot about because this thing about not—you have to be in certain kind of person to be considered the kind of woman. So you don't fight. So taking up arms, I mean, I remember following the Nicaraguan struggle really intensely because we always see this in the South that women join the revolution and they trained to fight them.

Cause they understand the pain of what's happening. And it's not that the others don't, but they have been socialized that fighting is so terrible. But as soon as you pick up arms, the resocialization begins. This is about you. This is about your survival. This is about taking down the larger patriarchal system. So that problem…I think is right on track. It's understandable that the men must not buy. So even women of color here and in the South, kind of cringe. [inaudible]. Yeah.

What happens like with the Kurdish fighter? So you commodify these fighters, do you make them into these beautiful young women with guns and it's all over the internet?

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NG: Yeah. We never got the front pages…because they are dark skin fighters and race plays a role there. But with the Kurdish fighters, like what's happened recently, there was this article three years ago, New York Times, Kurdish women fighting sexism and ISIS. No they're not,

they're fighting for Kurdistan. They have always been fighting for Kurdistan in the U.S. will not back that in the end. So when everybody was surprised, Oh my God, the US didn't back Kurdistan, it was shocking. But I think, the question of capital for me, and it's certainly not an area that I focus on, but I have seen it function in terms of how the money flows into movements. And as it filters through like philanthropy which is itself I think trying to be a movement now, which is very strange, but as it flows through these spaces, everybody is funded by the same people.

All of this civil society, all the NGOs, all the grassroots organizations, all language that has become fundamentally meaningless because it's, entrenched in the same system of capital. So that space to me, the money, and where it's coming from for movement building is really sort of critical to look at, because what are the ideologies that, that these six people have. Because that's, what's really shaping this work because maybe there are women in these spaces who support taking up arms or who a more radical perspective, but they're never going to articulate it, because you lose the money and that's the reality is that you lose the money. Then it's also not something that one can recommend because I don't want you to lose the money because of course you need it…for security training and other things.

But it's this, that I think women like me, who, who get to occupy this kind of—as schizophrenic as it is—dual position, that is our role is to on this side, say, particularly to even the most thoughtful donors and people giving money, this is not the correct approach. You cannot predetermined the politics of weapon you want to fund, even if it makes you uncomfortable. And, and really, you cannot have a conversation about power, philanthropy without questioning where the funds came from. It's amazing to me that you can have these like progressive conversations on funding without where do the capital come from? Who was it extracted from? And that, I think, I mean, at times it feels like we're too far apart. Like it's never going to actually match, what I know and what they believe.

But in so far as my work has the ability to infuse these conversations in the policy world and with the new [inaudible] and Beyond Identity. And with this insistence that you cannot keep holding women captive to your ideas that I think will have an impact on the other end. Even at least posing the question, in these spaces, like what does trauma-based mobilizing do? It's not effective because a woman who was constructed as a sexualized victim will never be seen as a political actor. So that doesn't help us. I know that you're think you're helping the feminist struggle, but you're not. You're constantly reconstructing a victim in different ways, and that is deal politicizing.

LEC: This is so interesting because it brings me to the thinking then last night, one of the things that, one of the questions that they asked us was we're talking about compromising your principles on what the costs will be and stuff. And one question was, how do you not compromise your principles? But get the money, get the funding to do the kind of work you really want to do. So that was such a deep question because they saw like some kind of selling out things as possible. And if you're not gonna do that, then how will you get this work done? So we answered by going to, well, part of this is about the methodology. So you're applying for the funds. You don't lie. You don't like if you get the funds and you do what you want, and that's part of the doing what you want, that you just have, because I saw it as a deep really challenging question that they had, they were trying to wrap their minds around. So, you all are activists and you have this kind of thinking, but how do you get funding? Well, [inaudible] said, well, we don't get funding, but we would look for funding and we are looking for funding and we're going to say, and I said, yeah, we're going to say what we're doing. And here we now have the project. You can go and look at it. But in thinking, in terms of revolutionary work, this requires a certain level of guerrilla warfare.

[00:45:10]

NG: Yeah. When you're at a place like SIPA and these young women of color come to and say like, I dunno what I'm doing here. Like these professors are telling me things

CTM: What is SIPA?

NG: The School of International and Public Affairs at Columbia. It's so conservative and it's, and I tell them, this is guerrilla warfare. I said, you learn how they think you learn, how to, why can I go and present to Congress? Because I know the language of political science, you want to use your standards and measures and all that fine. I can argue that too. But this is all a part of, of a strategy. And I think with the donors in particular, we did a session in Myanmar on with political activists.

And it was fascinating. Like so many young women came out who were nationalists, kitchen nationalist, various. And I asked, when did nationalism become such a bad word? But even to be able to have those it felt like in that space, my role was to say, look, the doners need you. They need to spend this money. So don't just take what they're giving you. You fight back for what you want to do, because, because they need you, it's not the other way around. They lose access. They lose everything if, and I think it's actually gotten to a point, in some places where donors are afraid to say anything. But then in us, it's so internalize it so deeply ingrained that when doesn't challenge whiteness or money, or, in any real way that even that in itself, being able to open up to them, like, please challenge the donors. Please tell them exactly what you want to do. If you want to do work around mobilizing kitchen women as nationalists.

LEC: Yeah. That's what, that's what we were trying to get the kids to understand really. You don't have to compromise their principles to get the work done. Yeah. I, the last question is what kind of vision do you have for the future? What kind of vision do you see for the women that you work with, both here and with the Tamil fighting women, what kind of vision you have for tomorrow or what their lives would be great for you?

NG: I see a lot of them, of them doing it already. And that's the thing I think is that it can't really be measured, but I can see it. I can see that some of the young women who came to me and would sit for 20 minutes and couldn't articulate anything because they were so anxious now. And then a year later called me and said, I have some suggestions on the program and how we could do better. I can see them organizing outside of the program, but maybe the most beautiful thing that I've seen is that they have 10 people to go through the world with, and I told them kind of create the communities. Yeah. If I have one, one woman to go through the PhD with…who were as cool as, as these young women are, when they go into law school—and they will—and two of them are going into PhDs and have already gone into immigration work here that when they face, the endless meetings of the NGO world or whiteness or patriarchy or all the things they're going to face, they have somebody on their WhatsApp group that they can say—and that's gonna—it's going to hold them together in a world that even if they haven't fully gotten there to what solidarity looks like and what it means.

And because I think, it's both of you, if I were deeply honest about my own work increasingly I think it's, it's trickle back to the Tamil cause explicitly, and to not care as much about the fact that nobody's gonna fund that and that people don't want to buy that book. And because I can actually see like one pathway for myself that will be—in this vein of branded social justice—celebrated

kind of individualized attention. And it's very clear to me that that pathway is very easy to access and I could step into that. But it's also clear to me that last week when I was in Sri Lanka, getting to sit with those women activists and talk through some of the work inside of our community to be done with the men and all of that…that's the space that I'm supposed to be in, and it's not going to come with any awards or a lot of funding.

CTM: But how amazing to become clear about that. That's not something that actually…people figure out.

NG: Yeah. Because even if you go back to, in the book, going back to reading the writings of the time, [inaudible] really beautiful male writers. But then the male writers are citing white European political thinkers. And so then you sort of reconnect to these texts that you read when you were younger and you're like…we've all learned the struggle through Europe, that it's come to the island and then it's come back. So I think there's not many of us who maybe can play the role of re-theorizing the struggle. And that is what I would like my work to be going forward.

CTM: That's wonderful. Great.

LEC: Thank you.

NG: Of course, thank you.

CTM:
Really provocative, thoughtful conversation. We really appreciate it.

NG: Of course, thank you.

[00:50:39 end video]

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.