

SESSION VIII – 'Money, a room and network freedoms' – My vision of democracy and gender justice

This session adopted a 'reading out' format. Virginia Woolf, English writer and publisher, said in her book in 1929 that "a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is going to write". Just to provocatively rephrase Virginia Woolf, 'network freedoms' has been interpolated into her quotation as a metaphoric reading of the possible ingredients of contemporary feminist politics. Participants in this session shared their vision of gender justice and democracy, interpreting what rights, freedoms and citizenship imply in contemporary times shaped by digital technologies.

Presenters:

Disha Mullick, Project Coordinator, Nirantar, India

Srilatha Batliwala, Advisor, CITIGEN, and Associate Scholar, AWID, India
(Provided below are transcripts of their story-telling)

Chair: Graciela Selaimen, Coordinator, Instituto NUPEF, Brazil

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Srilatha Batliwala - Advisor, CITIGEN, and Associate Scholar, AWID, India

Foster and McChesney, in 'The Internet's Unholy Marriage to Capitalism', say: "But technologies do not ride roughshod over history, regardless of their immense powers. They are developed in a social, political, and economic context. And this has strongly conditioned the course and shape of the communication revolution" - and I would add, how people engage it.

"Every species forces the natural historian
To take as much to account for its evolution
Through an innovative form of narration
As it took the species to survive."

- Bruno Latour, Foreword to Power and Invention
by Isabelle Stengers

From the digital diary of Shabana, in Dhaka, Bangladesh:

So here I am at my special time, in my special place. A room of my own – but not really my own, but a space at the women's centre, the only place where I am ever able to be alone and with just myself. Also the only place where a few of us lesbians – just seven in fact – can meet once a week as ourselves, not as pretend best friends pretending to be doing joint study for our exams.

At home, even though they scraped and saved to get a computer for my brother, I am not allowed to use it, because they are afraid I will get under

some bad influences or look at dirty pictures (how do they know you can see dirty pictures on the computer?) or learn about things they'd rather I didn't know about, like sex. "After your marriage ask your husband to get you a computer" they say, "and then do what you want. But as long as you live under our roof, you must remain pure and innocent".

The computer at the women's centre has become my lifeline and my refuge. Even though we find it difficult to find and connect with other lesbians in Dhaka or even Bangladesh – surely there must be more than seven of us in this whole city, in this huge country? At least we can connect with our kind in other places, in places where they can openly gather and belong to lesbian groups and actually ask their societies and governments for their rights! One of the *didis* here helped me find those groups. How lucky they are! They can be there openly in Facebook and other networks without hiding themselves.

Online, I have taken the name Sapphorani – I learnt about her from the website of Sappho, a lesbian rights group in Kolkata in India. And I can read about lesbian women of today, Bengali like me, who have come out, I can read their stories too. But there is one big problem – so many things about lesbian issues is in English, and my English is very poor. In Bangla, there is not much. So I forced my parents to buy me a Bangla-



Srilatha Batliwala

English dictionary, saying that learning more English before my marriage will help me get a better husband. They support that.

And it is not just the English – I am really dying to write my story, to write about my anger and the revulsion I feel about marriage, but I am afraid. The women's centre people told me I must be careful about what I write on the net, because there are ways they can find out who you are, there are invisible people who are watching and there are many people in the police who are especially watching the women's groups in Dhaka because they have been active in politics and in supporting many groups of women they do not like. But Bangladesh is a free country now – we fought a big war and so many people gave their lives for us to be free, to have our own freedom and laws. Why then is there no law against forcing a woman to marry against her will?

In school, we were taught in our Islamiyat class that Muslim women have rights. We were taught that Allah is merciful and all-forgiving. He created us, and we are his children. So if I have these feelings, surely He knows and will forgive and accept me and love me. But they say that what I feel towards other women is a sin. And I went to the websites of different Islamic organisations and they all say that Allah is merciful but I am a sinner. They even say that we in Bangladesh are not true Muslims, because our women are given too much freedom, we do not dress or behave as proper Muslim women should. That we should all wear full *hijab*, hide our hair, and not be on the street going anywhere alone.

I do not understand this – my grandmother and great-grandmother did not wear *hijab*, they wore saris, and they wore big red *bindis* like their Hindu neighbours, and they also did their *namaz* five times a day. And my grandmother told me how she marched on the streets with her brothers against the British, and how she and her entire neighbourhood women burnt their imported British-cloth blouses in the street, how they were encouraged to take part in all these actions by their own fathers and brothers and husbands. That is why they put their daughters in school. My aunt is a doctor, another aunt a professor in the university.

In the website of *Ain-o-Shalish* Kendra, the women's legal aid organisation, they say that Bangladesh has given equality to women. This

must be true because we have had two women Prime Ministers. And they say the law against people of the same sex loving each other was made by the British, not by my country. I also saw in *Ain-o-Shalish* that there is a group called Sisters in Islam, and Women Living Under Muslim Law. Our small group of seven discussed this – we were very excited. Will these groups help girls like me? Can we become members? Will the police find out if we send them an email and ask them for help? So again, I am afraid. So again, I must depend on the *didis* of the Women's Centre to help me find out if we can get help from these organisations.

The other day the police arrested a group of boys who like boys in Dhanmondi, who had a social club of their own. They beat them up very badly, almost killed one. They threatened their parents and demanded money. But one of the families was a very powerful one, close to the ruling party, so the Minister came on TV and said they will have an enquiry. But he also said that what the boys did was illegal and un-Islamic and against God's will.

Sometimes I cannot think about all this anymore. I get tired of feeling alone and afraid. So I come to this room and when the *didis* are not looking, I just like to go to the Internet and watch the Bollywood songs on the YouTube – I really like *Chhammak Chhalo* and *Kolaveri di*, or bits of Bollywood movies, or those two cute little twin girls talking to each other. At least at those moments, I feel free and happy.

From the digital audio diary of Sundaramma, leader of the village collective in Ittagi village of Bidar District:

Every day, I thank God that he helped some clever men to make a machine like this – the computer. Thanks to this miracle, a Dalit woman like me, illiterate and poor but clever and strong, can keep my thoughts safe somewhere, without knowing how to read or write. I can talk to myself, remind myself of all that I have done for our village – me, who only knew how to sow and weed and harvest a *ragi* or lentil crop, rear chickens, or sweep a floor or carry a bundle of firewood on my head or a howling child on my hip! – and I can remind myself of what I still have to do. It also helps me talk to my unborn granddaughters and great-granddaughters so that they will get the courage to keep up the fight for women's equality, for an end to our poverty of



learning and in resources, the fight that I began here in this small and ancient village, with a small group of other women like myself.

And that is not all. My son Mallesh is very clever. I have slaved and saved to make sure he stays in school, even fought when his father wanted him to quit school and join him in wage earning. And because the Goddess has made him so clever, he has been sent to the district government school, where the teachers are better and they have computers. And through that computer, he learnt that the government is giving computers to women's groups to help them learn more and manage the small businesses they have made with the many, many different loans that everybody now wants to give poor women.

So then we went to the *panchayat* and forced them to apply and get the computer for our women's group. "Fools!" they said. "You cannot even sign your names, what will you do with a computer?" But we are *sangha* women – we are long past the time of being scared of those stupid men. "Don't worry about that" we said, "that is our problem". Fools are they, not to know that to use a computer you do not need to be literate, you just need to have control over your children who can read! And we are not fools to believe everything the computer says just like we do not believe everything the landlord, or the government officer or the elected politician tells us - we discuss things and decide for ourselves.

Anyway, thanks to our Dalit leaders and our Dalit movement, all our children – at least the boys - can go to school, and some of them even managed to learn to read, even though those rascals who call themselves teachers hardly turn up once or twice a week. Well, we fixed them. We once picketed a teacher who was constantly absent for three days – he could not go home and we barely let him come out to pee (though we gave him food), so they started being afraid and coming more regularly. Anyway, the thing is even though I am his mother, my Mallesh was the cleverest of all the children, so he won a full scholarship to the district school.

So with the help of the computer – and Mallesh of course - the *sangha* women and I have started to think about how we can make our village a model village for women. And when that happens, it will be a better place for everybody. Mallesh told us about many ideas he found on the computer. I like thinking about ideas – I never

had the chance before - but the ones I like best are justice and equality. I think these are women's ideas – only women really care about justice and equality. This is what we need in our village – it will be the foundation for everything we must build to make this an ideal village.

Our village will look like this:

- There will be justice and equality in all relationships – first in the family and then the whole village – nobody will be high or low, big or small, too powerful or powerless.
- There will be justice and equality in the distribution of all resources – the land, water, forests, grazing land, firewood;
- In the same way, there will be justice and equality in health, education, and all the services we need in the village - every child, girl or boy, will go to school and really learn important and valuable things, the schools will work well, the doctor and nurse will come to health centre regularly and not charge us extra money for what should be free; no woman will die in pregnancy or childbirth, no newborn will die because there was no one to save their life.
- In the same way, there will be justice and equality in the sharing of private resources like food, or the money we earn, our savings, property like animals, house, or land etc.
- Everyone will have an equal voice in decisions whether in the family or at the village council, in decisions about both private and public matters.
- In our village, no woman will ever cry because she was beaten or otherwise threatened or insulted or harassed by anyone.
- But if she is, she can go freely and unafraid to the police or the *panchayat*, and her complaint will be heard, her case registered, and justice done.
- Everyone will have an equal right to participate in any forum if they have a right to be there - the right to participate

in everything – a woman farmer in the farmers federation, a Dalit woman in the Dalit association, a Dalit or tribal girl or boy in the youth club, every member of the village, including the children, in the village council meeting and budget setting, the village meetings held by the district collector, the political party rallies, any space they want to be a part of or influence.

- There will be justice and equality in information – everyone will have the right to know the village budget, how it was spent, who decided what, who got what, who did what. We will especially know information about who stole what from whom – how much of the money for the village went into whose pocket, so we can punish them in the women's court and stop this corruption. Everyone's knowledge will be valued and respected – no one will be dismissed as ignorant or foolish.
- Everyone will be treated equally by government officials, the police and the court. But the police and court is sometimes very far away for us, so we women have created our own court in the village. The women's group came and gave us training in laws, and we are continuing the training through the computer, every month (the women's group ladies are teaching us through the computer, which becomes like a TV, but we can also talk and ask questions). Some of us have become very good judges – we have been handling many cases in the village, and especially cases where women have faced injustice. Even a lot of men – even upper caste men – have started trusting us and bringing cases to the women's court. They know we are fair and cannot be fooled, bribed or threatened. Our punishments are also fair – sometimes it is just a public acknowledgement of your mistakes and a public apology, but sometimes it is concrete penalties and fines – whether for beating your wife, encroaching on your neighbour's land, or the child care worker stealing the food from the child care centre.
- And no girl will be forced to marry if she

wants to study, and no girl will be married before she is 18 years old.

Well this is all I have thought of so far, and other *sangha* women have added to it. Oh, I am not as crazy as you think. I am very serious. I am so serious that I sent a message about this plan of mine to the Chief Minister of our state (I do not know what a state is, but Mallesh says he is in charge of our village in the big city of Bangalore). I sent my plan the Prime Minister of India (Mallesh says our village is in a big country called India, he showed me a picture of this country on the computer, and I still do not understand what a country is, but I was happy I lived in such a beautiful country, shaped like a conch shell!). He says the PM is a very important main person in the government, which is like the village council of this India country. And I sent it to the President of this India country, because Mallesh said she is a lady and she would understand and support me, even though neither Mallesh nor I can understand what her job is.

I am waiting for their reply. I do not want anything from them. Everything we did so far in our village we did without knowing they existed. But I just want them to know about our plan and give their blessings. And if our village is in their 'state' and their 'country', they should know what plans we women have made to change it.

Mallesh says they will send their reply to the computer. So I am waiting. They are very busy and important people, so it will take time. In the meanwhile, I am very busy too. There is so much to do.

**Disha Mullick - Project Coordinator,
Nirantar, India**

Prologue: A collective autobiography

Just as living and teaching in the digital, new media, network age has pushed me to push others to do – I have pulled at, interacted with, adapted, modified, shared - stretched out of shape - both my autobiography, and others', in an attempt to create this narrative of nothing so onerous as a vision, but rather of the (collective) experience of engaging in and with a contemporary moment in feminism.

My idea was to read out (or show) a range of voices – mine, *Khabar Lahariya* journalists from Bundelkhand region of UP that I have worked



with, Muslim women that have been trainees in new media trainings – emails, letters, stories, blog posts, poems, news reportage.

This is an imaginary story, of a woman in a village.



Disha Mullick

I was travelling in a train once. I was sitting on my berth. The window next to me was open, and cool breeze was coming in through it. It seemed like the trees and shrubs were running past us. The mountains and waterfalls were walking with us. I was absorbing this scene when my gaze fell upon the seat in front of me. She was sitting there, lost in her thoughts, as if she were lifeless. I stared at her for a long time. Then I broke my silence and began the conversation, with a laugh.

I've been thirsty for so long - for stories and pictures of movements and women that worked and wrote and shouted and blocked and occupied and sang and danced and stepped on toes and learnt and taught and travelled and decided to step outside before me. And lead to me being where I am. Up all night on trains that snaked through barren terrain, now cracked, now green, now yellow, listening to tales of other friends and sisters, some that turned bitter, some lost along the way, reading about them, writing about them, slipping through yellowed transparencies to see familiar faces, familiar spaces – finding my place in the past, finding a collective that I was part of, obscured in the mystery of oral histories passed down. Whoever thought about the images and stories I am living, the friends and colleagues that slipped into my life, their own experiments with form and medium, making possible revisions of themselves, becoming bits and pieces of my kaleidoscopic vision of the world, changing its colours, making them richer, darker?

Working in Punjab is not easy

"Last year I went to Punjab to work. I took my children along. When I boarded the train from Banda I had to sit in front of the toilet, as there was no other place. The children sat on my lap the whole night. Every time someone went past, I got kicked. After a lot of difficulty on the train I managed to reach Jhansi. From Jhansi I had to take a different train and change two buses before I could reach Punjab. It took me two-and-

a-half days to reach Punjab and during this time I barely ate or slept. I was exhausted by the time I reached. As soon as I reached, the contractor of the brick kiln gave me several instructions. He told me to start work immediately, even before I could cook any food for the children. I was told to use a spade to dig and break up clumps in the soil. After this I had to turn the handle of the generator for about one hour in order to pump water, which was used to moisten the soil. Then I had to further break clumps in the hard soil in order to make it soft like clay. Only after this was the soft soil used to make bricks. I used to get up at 2 am to cook food. At 3 am I had to leave home even when it was bitterly cold. I had to walk for a mile to reach the brick kiln. Things were so bad that getting one square meal in the day used to make me feel good. I got only two hours of sleep in the whole day. Sometimes out of exhaustion I used to sleep on the ground while working. Despite working so hard I was not given my full wages. The contractor even tried to molest me several times. Even if a worker made a small mistake the contractor would throw them out. On top of all this he would use the choicest abuses on us all the time. After a year of working in these conditions, I have come back to my village. But famine and starvation continue. I fear that I will have to migrate to Punjab for work again."

- KL Issue # 29, December 16-31, 2006
(Special Issue on Famine)

I saved my own life

"My name is Muniya. I live in Ranipur village of Manikpur block. Fifteen years ago I got married to Kishori who lives in Sidhi district in Madhya Pradesh. Kishori used to frequently beat me for dowry. I finally separated from him and filed for maintenance. For the last ten years I have been living in my maternal home. In July 2005 I won the case. Kishori called to me Satna so that I could take the maintenance amount. But when I reached Satna, he took me to Maihar, and left me with a *sadhu*. The *sadhu* said that my husband had sold me for Rs 20,000. When I heard this, I made the excuse that I needed to visit a temple to pray to a goddess and managed to leave the *sadhu's* clutches. Instead I called the local police *thana* and told them everything. They immediately investigated the matter. Kishori and the *sadhu* were arrested and sent to jail. I am now staying with my parents and earning my own living."

- KL's concluding comment: Kishori and the sadhu were in jail, so we could not speak to them KL Issue # 61, 15-31 August, 2005

Am I a feminist? The question sat heavy in my inbox, sometimes from older feminists, sometimes my contemporaries and friends. It always befuddled the hell out of me. I could not imagine not being feminist. I could not imagine not being acutely aware of my gender, my normativity, my non-normativity, my class, my educational privileges, my language, my discomfort with being in the position of 'trainer' just because I had gotten off the train from Delhi, being called 'didi' for the first time by a woman my age, but married for 12 years, been neglected, separated, now leading her own media collective. I could not imagine a self not engaged in a pedagogy of resistance in some tiny, relentless way, in imaginations of new worlds. My feminist awareness of power lurking in every observation, training, conversation, pinched me relentlessly, so that my relationship with feminism was, in a word, uncomfortable. Where did I fit into the long journeys, the pedagogies and possibilities of empowerment, the production and contestation of a public space and voice that my rural, Dalit, tribal, Muslim women colleagues and friends, had negotiated over the years?

I took up this book with a kind of idea that I might say something about my writing but now what do I feel about my writing? One must write from deep feeling, said Dostoevsky. And do I? or do I fabricate with words, loving them as I do? No I think not. In this book I have almost too many ideas. I want to give life and death, sanity and insanity; I want to criticise the social system, and to show it at work, at its most intense – but here I may be posing. Am I writing the hours from deep emotion?

A year passed, more maybe. My feminist pedagogy, worn down by self consciousness, stretched itself to accommodate new technologies of communication. The murky fact of the digital divide, the pleasure and danger innate in each grip on the mouse, each page typed, email sent out, accessing desired people and places, each portrait or photo story or film that recreated or reshaped their very immediate worlds and relationships, reshaped the way the world saw them, each posting on the blog that registered that they were there, in that bus, listening to that conversation, reacting to it – voicing that reaction in a sphere distinct to the

very local one they moved and worked within – being part of sparking the thrill, the capability, the exploration of a new space for knowledge production, experiencing a very different role as trainer, with the power to show how technology worked, but not what it could produce, being surprised by this rapid proliferation of new selves and stories and articulations of feminism layered in with the old. The very electric overlap between virtual and real, urban and rural, privileged and marginalised, traditional and new forms of storytelling, this is how I found my feet within feminism. Democracy can be broken into little bits. New languages – words, syntax, grammar, semantics – took form, bending and twisting existing practices of communication between us. Indeed, new ways of talking within the new network society began to be inscribed on old relationships of power, necessarily changing them, recasting them. New ways of determining who is looking, looked at, possibilities and challenges of new compositions emerged.

Disha then showed a short film where women spoke on their experience with the Internet and computer.

Still, questions of who was inviting whom into the new spaces of knowledge production, what actually happened to the new knowledge or identities created through new media, what currency they held within the terms of the local contexts and structures of our feminism remain. How do these new pedagogies of resistance, of understanding and framing the world and ourselves in it, expand the spaces we inhabit, push our ownership of them?

This is a photograph of me

It was taken some time ago.

At first it seems to be

a smeared

print: blurred lines and grey flecks

blended with the paper;

then, as you scan

it, you see in the left-hand corner

a thing that is like a branch: part of a tree (balsam or spruce) emerging

and, to the right, half way up

what ought to be a gentle slope, a small frame house.

In the background there is a lake

and beyond that, some low hills.



The photograph was taken
The day after I drowned.

I am in the lake, in the centre
of the picture, just under the surface.

It is difficult to say where
precisely, or to say
how large or small I am:
the effect of water
on light is a distortion

but if you look long enough,
Eventually
you will be able to see me.

- Margaret Atwood, 1966

Disha then showed the blog run by a women

*collective and followed it by a reading of an entry
by Laxmi, who is one of the editors of Khabar
Lahariya in Bihar:*

"I like emailing the best, searching on google,
because when I used to see people emailing, I
used to wonder what they were doing and will I
ever be able to do it. So when I first touched the
computer and sent an email, the happiness I felt,
I cannot describe in words. I was able to search
for jokes and poetry and photographs. I was able
to email my own experience out and read other
peoples. Typing, photography, videography – I
enjoyed it a lot. I keep looking for new things."

Graciela, the moderator of the session, to
conclude, read out Audre Lorde's '[Tranformation
of silence into language and action](#)' followed by
excerpts from '[Human rights for the information
society](#)' by Cees J. Hamelink.