

## **Episode 3: Feminism(script)**

### **Subha Wijesiriwardena**

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### **Srilatha Batliwala**

Welcome to Think Feminist by CREA, a podcast on feminist ideas to help deepen your feminist way of thinking. I'm Srilatha Batliwala, your host, and you're listening to the third episode of Think feminist.

In this episode, we're going to talk about the big F word, feminism. It's a big idea. And everyone has their own definition of what feminism means. I like to look at it in three ways.

Feminism as an ideology, feminism as a particular way of analyzing society, or an analytical framework, and feminism as social change strategy.

What does feminism as an ideology look like? Here's author and activist Farah Ghuznavi from Bangladesh talking about it.

### **Farah Ghuznavi**

So for me, feminism is essentially about equality. It's about equality, not just between men and women, but between people of all all kinds, including per gender, including LGBTQI,

as well as race, religion, caste, creed, and all those other intersectionalities. And the fact is that we are born into this world with different resources and different abilities. But I believe very strongly that we should all be treated equally, we should have the same access to resources and the same treatment from society.

And the absolute basic element of that is a respect for your fellow human being. And I think that's what feminism is about to be, it's about standing up for those rights and standing up for those rights for others as well.

So that as a community as humanity as a whole, we can ensure that justice is done for people, for every individual, regardless of their capacities, or where they were born or what their abilities.

And and as a feminist, my role there is that when I'm engaging with society, whether it's with individuals or with larger groups, or within organizations, it is to promote those beliefs and to engage with others who either question or share those beliefs, so that

we can help them to reach further, essentially, it's perhaps utopian to say, all of humanity, but certainly to reach as many people as we can ourselves as individuals and within groups, as activists.

### **Srilatha Batliwala**

Feminist ideology believes that patriarchy is the key power structure responsible for the oppression of women, and that it works with and through other power structures.

Our second guest today is Subha Wijesiriwardena who is a feminist activist, researcher and writer, and my colleague at CREA. Subha joins us from Sri Lanka. She helps us understand feminism as an analytical framework.

### **Subha Wijesiriwardena**

To me, feminism fundamentally, is an analysis of power. And how feminists have understood or tried to deconstruct power is, I think, the most fundamental and interesting thing about feminism.

The other kind of defining feature about how feminism works is not just that it tries to understand or deconstruct and analyze power it does so, in relation to how gender shapes our experience, of the world and of our rights and of our status in our society.

### **Srilatha Batliwala**

Basically, what I consider unique about feminism, and what we emphasized in our earlier episode on power, is that when other ideologies of equality stopped outside the door, feminism opens the door, and questions power structures in the most private and intimate spaces.

There are various faultlines in feminist agendas that exist at these intersections that Subha is referring to. And analyzing intersectionality was one such It was raised by black feminists in the United States,

who saw that the mainstream American feminism was very white in its perspective and analysis and priorities, ignoring the way that race and class impacted non white women,

feminists from the global south and indigenous feminists around the world have further developed and deepened the concept of intersectionality. intersectionality, as Suba explains, is ...

### **Subha Wijesiriwardena**

...This idea that we all existing at the intersection of multiple structures of power and multiple structures of oppression, but also, at the same time bearers of different kinds of power and privilege ourselves, right.

So, I think this expression of intersectionality is, is a very core idea about feminism, right? It's very embedded in feminism. So on one hand, feminists understood that gender was a very critical domain of where discrimination was happening.

But they also saw the ways in which gender intersects with other similar structures like race, like caste like class. And they also saw that gender doesn't work alone, right, that it works with these other structures at the same time. So these forms of intersectionality, I think, are what makes feminism really special.

Precisely that it sets out to say it's not special, right, that feminism is actually should be embedded in all struggles, because all struggles are interlinked. And I think that's one of the really kind of interesting ways that feminists have tried to analyze social problems.

### **Srilatha Batliwala**

Just like a feminist analytical framework has helped redefine what gender, is to be inclusive for instance of trans and non binary people, feminist analysis has challenged and transformed many other concepts and ideas.

For example, feminist economists have fundamentally changed the way the concept of work is defined and understood. The traditional economic definition of work used to be labor applied for some kind of production, and labor exchanged for payment in cash or kind.

But feminism redefined work to ensure that the invisible, unpaid work of women is counted. Feminist economists theorized and proved that reproduction is also work. And that so called subsistence activities like housework, child care, elder care, fetching water fodder and fuel is very much work.

They asserted that preserving relationships and emotional labor that women do, maintaining ties with relatives, taking care of guests, caring for children, the ill or the aged, comforting people in pain, or in grief. All this is work.

Most of all, they showed that all the activities done to preserve the status of the family in the community, performing religious rituals, worship, and conforming to the good woman norms that preserve status is also work.

And they call it status production. Farah tells us about an experience of hers during the fasting month of Ramadan, that illustrates this point very clearly.

## **Farah Ghuznavi**

I was in another organization where a lot of people were fasting. And as you probably know, women cannot fast during their periods. So one of my other colleagues had been fasting for 15 days, and then she stopped.

And obviously, we all knew why she had stopped fasting. But there was a group of men in that office who would actually just badger her and say, "Why? Why are you eating? Aren't you fasting?"

And she came to me one day, and she was crying about it. And I said you should say something to them, because, again, she was not very senior in the organization. But say something that shut them up once and for all?

And she said, I can't do it'll cause problems for me. So I said, "Okay." I wasn't fasting, because I'm asthmatic. So I take medicine and that is one of the other reasons you're excused.

So we had lunch together, and her colleagues were there. They didn't say anything. They were looking, looking at us. They were my peers basically. So as I was leaving, I said, I believe, you all wonder that sometimes we fast and sometimes we don't.

And I suggested to them that you ask your mother why women don't fast all 30 days a month and I left. And I thought things would hit the fan, which they did. But she wasn't part of it. So luckily, she didn't get any of the blowback. But there was a lot of talk about what a smart mouth I had on myself and who did I think it was?

## **Srilatha Batliwala**

Who do you think you are? This is such a common question that women get asked when they assert their rights, because patriarchy is determined to limit the space that a woman is supposed to occupy, and therefore seeks to shame her when she is seen as overstepping those boundaries.

One of the consequences of being a practicing feminist is that you hear the most uninformed opinions and criticisms of what a feminist supposedly is. There are all these myths and misconceptions about feminism, and feminists, as Subha talks about,

## **Subha Wijesiriwardena**

We've had people in various positions of power in all parts of the world say that feminists, they're destroying families, right, because, of course, feminists have campaigned to stop gender based violence and violence in the home, or to take violence survivors, who are survivors of gender based violence in the home seriously. And those things have been seen as feminists wanting to "destroy" the family and family values.

And those kinds of things you see come up in any country where there has been a fight to recognize domestic violence, and the fact that many survivors of domestic violence are, in fact, women, right?

Or LGBTI. People, for example. So those kinds of narratives have been there for a long time, right? Feminists are man hating, they are lesbians, they are, against family values, etc, etc.

### **Srilatha Batliwala**

The other big accusation in many parts of the world, and one that you've probably heard, is that feminism isn't part of our tradition. It's not part of our religion or culture. It's a Western import.

### **Farah Ghuznavi**

So I think there is plenty of proof to indicate that this thinking is not a foreign concept.

### **Srilatha Batliwala**

Isn't it interesting that even when Farah started working in rural Bangladesh, some 30 years ago, when no one had heard of feminism, the people there would say, it's important to educate our daughters.

### **Farah Ghuznavi**

And at one of those sessions, I asked this question, "Boys or girls, who would you educate"? And there was this one woman. I used her as a character in one of my stories, but she's real. And I called her Baby Rani in the story.

And so Baby said, "I have one daughter and two sons. And I plan to educate my daughter further than I will be educating my sons." And there was a kind of collective gasp around the room and people said, "That's ridiculous!" All the women said, "You can't be serious."

And she said, "Yes, I will. Because in Bangladesh, a girl needs to be much better than a boy to be taken seriously. So if my son has a bachelor's degree, my daughter will have a master's degree in order to make sure that she can do what she needs to do."

I should add here that Baby's husband was a fisherman who had basically not finished primary school, and she had been married off to him. She'd completed her education further and finished her metric (10th grade).

And so she was mocked a lot in this fishing village that she came to from the nearby town for being overeducated. But it's interesting, she threw it to them as a challenge. And she said, "Do you disagree?"

And then I saw that out of the 40 to 45 women, there 10 or 15 who were like, "No, you're right, you're right." And another 25 were like that's just not how it works.

So this is, these are indigenous women. These are not highly educated women, they're not privileged women, they are not exposed to Western ideas, per se. So, I think it's just a method that is used to discredit feminism when when this is said. It's a fairly obvious method.

### **Srilatha Batliwala**

So when you hear feminism and feminists called bad names, what you're really hearing is patriarchy feeling very deeply threatened. You're hearing patriarchal power feeling shaken and trying to protect itself. you're witnessing its attempt to keep its control on our minds and on our societies.

### **Subha Wijesiriwardena**

I think there is an incredible history of discrediting feminists and what feminists say Right? Even if they're not speaking about feminism, even if it's a feminist speaking about, Palestine or about incarceration or is any other thing.

There is a long history of very deliberate campaigns to discredit, and therefore delegitimize what feminists say because they speak from this vantage point of being a feminist, and I think that has been an incredibly well, well resourced, well organized campaign that has taken multitude forms and variations over a long history.

### **Srilatha Batliwala**

In fact, feminists and feminist resistance to patriarchal injustice has existed in all parts of the world, from long before the word feminism existed. One of my favorite ancient feminists is Akkamahadevi, who lived almost 1000 years ago in South India, and joined a great uprising called the Veerashaiva movement against the caste system.

But she joined only when the movement's leaders agreed to include the injustices against women as part of their movement's agenda. She was a spiritual teacher, who was famous, because she stripped off her clothes, and walked naked from village to village, preaching against caste and gender discrimination.

When people abused her for her nakedness, she replied scornfully, when the great Lord sees only my essence, why should I hide my body from the likes of you? And in one of her hundreds of poems Akarot. Why do you fear to live in the jungle amidst wild animals, and not in the far more dangerous Society of men.

### **Farah Ghuznavi**

And another example that you can see very, in very practical terms, Bangladesh is one of the enormous success stories in terms of population control. And it was so interesting, where basically, it took off as soon as women were given the choice.

Yet, if you talk to the traditionalists, they will tell you birth control is not indigenous, of course, it is, there are roots and herbs that have been used for centuries, to bring on miscarriages. Which is, which is when miscarriages were used as a form of birth control.

So there is nothing and that desire, not to just be a baby making machine not to be put through that, that desire is a desire that very many indigenous women have. So if birth control is a western concept, the idea of having, of using these methods for birth control for all of these hundreds of years, would not apply.

I think this is just such an absurd argument that I don't even think it's one we need to we should spend too much time engaging with because I think it's just very interesting that the only time tradition and culture are brought to bear is when it's about depriving people of rights, whether it's dalits or whether it's women, or whether it's children.

Why do we not hear about the positive traditions? Why are those not brought to bear? Islam says that women have the right to education. So that is the right that is enshrined in religion. And it's a good, positive side of the religion.

So therefore, I would like us to also look at the positive traditions, the people who come forth as traditionalists invariably bring the regressive ideas to the fore, very many of them.

### **Srilatha Batliwala**

So listening to Farah and Subha, it is clear that patriarchy is the most deeply embedded, normalized, pervasive and often invisible power structure. And that true social justice cannot be achieved without dismantling it.

Addressing patriarchy, and transforming the ideology, norms and institutions through which it survives, requires feminist ideology, feminist analysis and feminist social change strategies.

So feminists are forced to examine power within themselves as part of this change. They have to look at power within their own private lives and relationships. And as part of a political agenda and larger movement.

### **Subha Wijesiriwardena**

I think one of the really unique things about feminism is that it asks you to transform yourself while transforming the world. Right. And I think that's really one of the things that does set it apart is that it does ask you to interrogate how power operates within you, how you wield power over others.

And it asks you to kind of embark on this process of self transformation, while being a really important agent of change in the world. Right? What is your resistance to feminist movements? Where is that really coming from?

Is that really how you feel? Or is that something you've been told over time because of this massive? Like I said, before, well oiled machinery that has been used to discredit feminists and feminist movements.

Is that you responding to that. So I would, again the feminist in me wants you to interrogate those things. And I really invite you to become part of a movement that is larger than you, but which definitely has a place for you.

So there is no question that feminism has shaken the world and our societies in a very fundamental way, as a social change strategy, spanning the personal and the political. Feminism has had huge impact, whether we want to acknowledge this or not.

### **Srilatha Batliwala**

Feminism and feminist movements have transformed the world in so many ways. They have challenged the mainstream development paradigm, economic policy, have expanded and changed the human rights framework and instruments.

They have reformed constitutional and legal frameworks to remove gender biases, they have demanded equal access to nutrition, health care, education, training, professional spaces, they have changed the way we think about social and cultural norms.

And most of all, they've transformed the whole concept of social justice by showing there can be no social justice without gender justice. But of course, like all movements, feminist spaces have struggled with questions of who is inside, and who is not, who is a true feminist, who is a woman, and so on.

There has been a lot of churning within the movement, and often many excluded groups, like women with disabilities, lesbian, bisexual, and trans women, sex workers, have challenged their exclusion, and the exclusion of their rights and interests by the mainstream feminist movements and agendas.

But as Subha says, this kind of tension has always been inherent in the movement. And it forces movements to rethink their politics, and their own embedded systems of power, in ultimately positive ways.



### **Subha Wijesiriwardena**

So I think rather than seeing it as a who's in and who's out, I think the important narrative is to remind people that this tension is as old as time, it's very intrinsic to feminist movements.

In fact, that's not to say that exclusion is not painful for people who are excluded, right? Exclusion is very painful. It's it's painful for trans folks to be told they don't belong in feminist spaces, because feminism is, quote, unquote, about women, right?

And whoever they think women are, it's painful for sex workers to be actively to be the subjects of active advocacy advocacy by feminists who think that sex work, all sex work is violence, right?

We're still having contentions about gender non conforming and non binary people, right? Do they belong? Are they part of the feminist agenda, right? Do we consider their rights part of a feminist agenda?

### **Srilatha Batliwala**

For many, feminism is initially an uncomfortable identity and practice to embrace. But once you do, and once you understand its core beliefs, its way of analyzing things and its way of making change. It is transformative and inspiring. As the story Farah shares with us shows,

### **Farah Ghuznavi**

one of the young women that I've been mentoring, who is actually a really strong, strong leader has become a strong leader over the course of the project that we've been working with. When she initially arrived. Her attitude was very, very different.

And she was quite judgmental about some of the other young women leaders. And it's, it's very interesting because quite probably a year later, she was working with some younger girls who were school going girls.

And one of the school teachers said something to her about, what isn't a nice girl like you doing in a place like this with all this feminist nonsense. And she just laughed and she said, Well, the feminists are the nicest girls. And if you don't know that, that must mean you don't know very many feminists.

### **Srilatha Batliwala**

Feminists are the nicest girls. I love that story and that phrasing, and it's such an affirmative place to end on. Because feminism has been the source of so much strength and solidarity, and the root of so much positive change across history and across the world.

We sincerely hope that this episode has helped you understand feminism more clearly. And to dispel the widespread myths and misconception around feminism and feminists.

Thanks for listening to think feminist. We'll be back with more episodes. For more about CREA, check out [Creaworld.org](http://Creaworld.org) or follow us on Twitter and Instagram @Think.Crea.

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