

Episode 4: Movements (Transcript)

Jasmeen Patheja

So much of movement building is learning to recognize that it is systemic. And it rests on so many stages from recognizing an injustice to creating a safe space to understand this injustice and examine it and address it to being able to build, to be able to define the agenda for change.

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 fourth episode of Think feminist.

Vandana Mahajan

I am Vandana Mahajan, and I am an independent gender equality practitioner. Based in Delhi. I've been part of the Indian Women's movement over a period of 25-30 years.

Srilatha Batliwala

In this episode, we look at movements, specifically feminist movements. I learnt a lot about movements in my own life, mainly by being directly involved in building two strong grassroots women's movements.

And so learning by doing but also by reading and studying a lot of the scholarly work on movements.

Today with the help of my inspiring guests, Vandana Mahajan, and Jasmeen Pateja, we are going to learn more about movements, what they are, how they are built, how they work, and how they create change.

Vandana Mahajan

When a group of people, who over a long period of time have been experiencing the pain of pinching of the shoe on their feet and they decide to say it aloud that it is hurting them and they don't feel comfortable.

They share their common experiences and collectively find out why and what is causing this discomfort. They identify who need to be spoken to, met with and decide how and what they're going to do to address the cause behind the issue of persisting hurting of their feet.

Their call for such an action ensures that the experience of wearing the shoe changes towards being a comfortable and satisfying one. And they keep marching on for the ride full and just fate of shoes for everyone.

So this is how I would like to explain through this simile. People who have experienced long held oppressive, being shackled by the oppressive gender norms.

They decide to collectively come together and change and challenge and transform what is unjust and unequal for them.

Srilatha Batliwala

There are a few characteristics of movements that Vandana helps us recognize with the examples she gave us. The first characteristic is that there is an organized membership or constituency base.

That is, the individuals or groups most interested in changing their situation come together in either formal or informal organizations of some kind. Let's go with one example and play it out.

Vandana Mahajan

I'm talking of the women's literacy movement that was started early 1990s by the tribal and Dalit women in some of the most backward, poor and feudal areas of Eastern up Bihar and Jharkhand.

As part of the education for women's empowerment program called the Mahila Samakhya program. The movement was built as a very studied analysis and response to battle patriarchy and classism,

the tribal Dalit and poor Muslim women from these areas had the firsthand systemic and systematic experience of being the victims of the structural violence of both patriarchy and caste system.

From the gender analysis, these Dalit and tribal women, they will have the roadmap of transforming their lives by fulfilling their desire and hunger to acquire the power of education.

Srilatha Batliwala

The second characteristic of movements is having a clear political agenda. A political agenda is created by answering five key questions. First, how do they analyze the root causes of the problem?

Second, what are the goals for change? Third, what is their vision of the alternative? Or have a more just situation? That is, how do they envision the difference they'd like to see?

Fourth, what strategies will they use to achieve their goals? And fifth, which individuals, groups or institutions will they target or engage, to bring about the change they seek?

Vandana Mahajan

The political here doesn't mean being part of the electoral system or political representation or, a political party scene, but it is the political here, is being inter, the cross sectioning, the power equation, the gender-power relations.

Srilatha Batliwala

The next characteristic of a movement is that it is not dependent on external leadership. Though external activists and allies may be supporting them in different ways. The movement must generate leaders from among its own members, and at multiple levels.

Vandana Mahajan

The Women's literacy movement became an extremely empowering process that has continued to transform till date, the lives of 1000s of poor women from some of the most marginalized and oppressive context to speak about the violence and finding the confidence of their collective voice and leadership at multiple levels, starting from home village, panchayat, schools, fields, jungles and mainstream institutions, not only locally,

but now nationally and globally also we are right, that movement of the Eastern UP to Heartland is being recognized.

Srilatha Batliwala

Another characteristic of movements is that they take collective actions and use joint strategies that members of the movement themselves undertake to advance their political agenda.

This is a combination of actions, raising voice, awareness building, protests, confrontation, engagement. These are the actions through which the movement, like the inspiring women's literacy movement that Vandana has shared with us, makes itself visible, gains political presence and power and challenges power structures.

Vandana Mahajan

So as part of the women's literacy movement, also, the women develop their own based on their own needs, their own innate wisdom and knowledge from their life experiences.

They develop the pedagogy of the curriculum, the developing of the teaching learning materials, the running of the teaching learning centers, the entire chain of the educational process was completely owned and transacted by women.

And this incredible women's literacy movement in the region give the confidence to these new illiterate and semi-literate poor women to start their own newspaper called Khabar Lahariya in 2002.

Srilatha Batliwala

Vandana is here leading us to recognize the final characteristic of movements, they must have some continuity over time. Movements are not just a spontaneous or short term uprising or campaign, though of course, movements often use campaigns as a strategy.

And some movements were born out of short term protests or uprisings around a specific issue. But strong movements take years to build, to grow, and to have impact.

Vandana Mahajan

When standard with the know how to read and write, the Neo literate journalist of Khabar Lahariya they were so overwhelmed with the stories that they felt that they needed to be badly told.

And that's how the Khabar Lahariya as a local newspaper was brought in the local language Bundeli, bringing these stories narrated and analyzed from a feminist lens in the mainstream space completely kind of managed by the Bundeli women.

And so in a way a Khabar Lahariya's origin and history is so closely interwoven with the women's literacy movement of that region. And not to be missed here is also the role of Khabar Lahariya now becoming a tool of empowerment in helping women and the illiterate to improve their literacy skills.

And now the reach of the Lahariya, which is now an eight page weekly local newspaper and brought out also in the digital format is now being sold across 600 villages in Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and Jharkhand, and it is run by Dalit women in Chitrakoot district of Uttar Pradesh.

Srilatha Batliwala

Khabar Lahariya is one of the shining successes of the Dalit feminist movement in India. And they do incredible grassroots journalism that has won national and international awards and acclaim.

And they are a great example of the characteristics of what a movement can look like you can find these characteristics of course, in any kind of social movement, both progressive ones focused on human rights,

environment, economic justice, indigenous rights, labor rights, but also in regressive and reactionary or fundamentalist movements that are opposed to gender equality and women's rights.

If that is the case, then what sets apart a feminist movement, what makes it different,

I would like to point to the two critical differences. One is that the feminist movement has the uniqueness of being women led and by women, I mean here, all the gender identities who identify themselves as women.

So women lead and decision making and leadership of women at all levels. feminist movement, unlike the other movements have a very strong and clearly articulated, gender transformative change agenda,

Vandana Mahajan

So, that again, is the uniqueness which is only one can see as part of the feminist movement. So, it needs to be recognized that this agenda for transforming the cultural norms, beliefs and practices can not be easily changed only by the social development approaches we see generally being practiced in the development community. It is through the root of the movement building that such internalized attitudes, values and practices can be changed.

Srilatha Batliwala

One of the comparisons I like to make is between feminist movements and women's rights movements, because the differences are useful to understand. feminist movements address the roots of gender power, that lead to women's subordination.

This is like patriarchy, and its intersection with other power structures, like caste, race, class, ethnicity, and sexuality. Women's Rights Movements are not quite there yet.

They tend to address the symptoms of gender power structures, the symptoms of patriarchal discrimination and injustice, and their impact on women. I've observed a continuum or a spectrum of approaches among movements addressing gender inequality, and gender based violence.

The first approach is those that focus on the immediate problem on the immediate conditions and the practical needs, and demand increased access, for instance, to resources. The next approach is that of women's empowerment.

These recognize the issue of power and women's rights, and the more systemic issue of gender power. And then, is the third approach where we have the more radical movements that demand a feminist social transformation. These movements are essentially saying, let's change the world for women and change it for everyone.

Jasmeen Patheja

A movement is something that's built over time; it is built by people.

Srilatha Batliwala

This is Jasmeet Patheja. In 2003 while she was a student in Bengaluru, she started an art project called Blank Noise to document the street harassment that women faced. I have found it really heartening to participate in the evolution of Blank Noise.

It has grown from a movement focusing on the immediate reality of violence and harassment of women, especially in public spaces, to one that is challenging the deeper roots of toxic masculinity and larger social attitudes that legitimize and enable such abuses to take place, as just mean explains, Blank Noise movement

Jasmeen Patheja

...is built by people who recognize this as a shared injustice and also are able to personally locate themselves in this injustice. And they also know that it's not something that begins and ends with them. It's something that's shared, they can see the systemic, or they learn to see the systemic.

And, so much of movement building is learning to recognize that it is systemic. And it rests on so many stages from recognizing an injustice to creating a safe space, to understand this injustice and examine it and address it to being able to build, to be able to define the agenda for change.

Srilatha Batliwala

This is a good reminder that movements are not born fully formed, nor do they just suddenly come into being, they have to be built brick by brick, and they grow as to the people driving them.

Jasmeen Patheja

I do know that I was experiencing street harassment and bringing it to my friends and peers and college. And because I was in college then and it didn't have any, it lacked, the response lacked the seriousness that my experience deserved.

And from that, it was proposed as a Diploma Project, a graduation project. And the project was also about the first six to nine action heroines as we call them, students in their first year, joining in and making the issue their own, making the movement, their own

Srilatha Batliwala

Blank Noise became a movement that spread across college campuses all over India and abroad. Jasmeen says that they use two strategies to plan their interventions. The first one was to build testimonials around the violence they were talking about, and then come up with new ways to document it to make it more visible.

Jasmeen Patheja

But after our first decade of work, we were addressing street harassment solely and bringing attention to it in innumerable ways from creating opinion polls that were where people could come and put a thumbprint on what they considered "eve teasing", but it listed a whole range of behaviors from stalking to people staring at breasts to people talking to the breast instead of the face. And we were being direct and explicit, but creating these interventions where people could be strangers in pop, citizens could come and put a thumbprint on what they considered street harassment.

Srilatha Batliwala

One of Blank Noise's most powerful campaigns is called 'I never asked for it' and it invites survivors to send in the clothes they were wearing when they were sexually harassed or violated.

Blank noise then exhibits these garments from sarees, kurtas and bulkers, to dresses, jeans and T shirts. They exhibit these garments in public spaces across the country and document the reactions of people online.

Jasmeen Patheja

'I never asked for it' started in 2004. And recognizing that most women and girls remembered the roots they were wearing when they experienced harassment. And it serves to be a memory of that incident. And we want to bring these garments together as an act of solidarity.

And the invitation really is how is victim-blame used to justify violence against different individuals and communities across identity locations?

But actually, it's not only limited to our understanding of street harassment because violence against women, girls and non-binary persons across identities, is justified across spaces from the home to the street, to the workplace to campus.

And so that's where I never asked for it is where somebody who has been widowed and desired to wear red; she wore red and was harassed and taunted for wearing red and being a Hindu widow.

And she claims her desire and she resists and and she brings that comment to 'I never asked for it' and brings her story to testimonials to 'I never asked for it'.

Srilatha Batliwala

The second strategy Blank Noise uses is to collectively imagine and desire the future they want and deserve, and find creative ways of manifesting that in the world.

Jasmeen Patheja

So, for example, an event like "Being Idle" was being held in 2007-2006, where we would just stand idle by city railings. And in doing so we were shifting our relationship with public spaces, with the city with our bodies, or in more recent years, we've been building "Meet to Sleep".

And again, in the context where "Meet to Sleep" is an action and activity or movement which rests on the power of feminist collaborations where we sleep in the open, we sleep in parks, we sleep by riverbanks we sleep anywhere under open skies. And we do this together.

Srilatha Batliwala

What a powerful idea, Meet to Sleep, just as men have always done in public places without fear of harassment. But what is important to note here is the difference between a leader instigated campaign and a movement, and that is inclusivity. As Jasmeen says, it's the organic participation of many people who feel ownership in their collective action, that really makes something a movement,

Jasmeen Patheja

"Meet to sleep" could arguably have been a campaign. But we work towards it being a movement, where every year it's built by feminist allies, but it is followed by things like, but conversations on what did it mean for you to do meet to sleep? What significance does it have for you?

Where do you desire to sleep, and gathering these experiences bringing them together, so meet to sleep really is held every year. And it is towards really the right to live defenseless where we sleep anywhere under open skies, and it's built in alliances, and association and collaboration with multiple organizations and networks, including CREA and Sangat's network. And it's built in rural and urban India.

And it is we do it also with the intention to understand that across our multiple lived realities, what is shared, I share certain privileges as somebody else may be more privileged, somebody else, maybe salad.

But yet, what is shared here in this space as we build "Meet to Sleep" and how does it become a shared agenda? How does it become something that collectively, but it becomes both an inquiry and an invitation at the same time?

And it is in these conversations that we build, post "Meet to Sleep", that some of this is understood that how do we across multiple realities have something this shared?

Srilatha Batliwala

One of the characteristics of feminist movements is that while there are plenty of feminist leaders in the movement, like Jasmeen, there is no owner, no one person or private board that dictates what the movement must be.

Which is why as Jusmeen points out, one of the skills of leading a movement is knowing how to bend, how to be open and collaborative.

Jasmeen Patheja

How to just return to listening and to listening to critique, listening to the absence of whose conversation is not present at the moment in terms of really understanding and addressing the issue and the change that we seek.

Yeah, listening is listening, and then recognizing that you don't have there's not one person with the answers. And the answers really lie in the questions a community raises and a growing community raises,

Srilatha Batliwala

even when we can point to specific, amazing outcomes that are the direct results of feminist movements like Khabar Lahariya, or changes in rape laws, or the conviction of rapists. Thanks to the me too movement. One of the best measures of the success of a movement is the impact it has on its own participants.

Jasmeen Patheja

I feel that that shared understanding and that shared resistance towards a shared imagination is Success is not the conversations that we're having to understand it that would read as success and it's not over.

It's maybe the friendship that it's initiating the potential of success. An idea has no significance or meaning until someone makes it their own.

Srilatha Batliwala

Jasmeen leads us to think about the challenges of assessing the impact of movements and how we measure their success. She points us to one of its primary results, people making the movement their own, but there are many others.

And you can learn more about this, and about movements and movement building as well in CREA's primer, all about movements. Now available on our website in the resources section.

Thanks for listening to Think Feminist. We'll be back with more episodes. For more about CREA check out Creaworld.org or follow us on Twitter and Instagram @think.Crea.

A Sonologue production.