

Episode 5: Organizations (Transcript)

Joanne Sandler

You have to be the change, you have to model that behavior and you will make mistakes. And we need to be kind to each other, and accepting of each other, and find ways to be honest with each other and supportive of each other. It sounds quite simple, and it's a lot of work.

Srilatha Batliwala

Welcome to think feminist by CREA, a podcast on feminist ideas to help deepen your feminist way of thinking. I am Srilatha Batliwala, your host, and you're listening to the fifth episode of Think feminist. In this episode, we will take a deep dive into organizations.

Why do organizations matter? And what do they have to do with feminist action? The answer is simple. When we're trying to dismantle the big, oppressive power structures around us, we do that day to day work through organizations of one kind or another.

Whether these are NGOs, or networks, or informal collectives, or educational or cultural institutions. All of these are organizations of some sort. And all organizations, whether formal or informal, have a set of goals, a stated reason for existing.

Ways of governing themselves and making decisions, strategies for achieving their goals, and some kind of structure or hierarchy in which their members are located. When you start analyzing organizations, you realize that they have, in fact, many of the same power dynamics that we see in larger society.

And this is sadly true, even in the world of feminist activism, and feminist organizations. So one of the most common questions that frustrates us as activists is, why do social justice and feminist organizations so often reproduce in their internal environment, the same oppressive practices of power that they say they are fighting in the larger society?

Why do I see or experience all kinds of biases and discrimination, like casteism, sexism, racism, ableism, homophobia, in my own activist organization, even if it is in subtle, or hidden forms?

Our guests today will help us find answers to many of these questions. Let's listen to Joanne Sandler from the United States, a lifelong feminist activist and advocate who has co-authored the important book, Gender at Work that analyzes power dynamics in organizations.

Joanne Sandler

I started working in feminist organizations in 1978. And I still work in feminist organization. So that's over 40 years. And one of the things that motivated me to do this work was when, I would say, the first 10 years, I kept wondering why is it that we are in conflict with each other, we all want the same things we're working with for the same goals and aspirations. Why do we end up in these conflicts and tensions and competitions with each other? It doesn't make sense how we build healthy feminist organizations.

Srilatha Batliwala

In the 1990s, Joanne worked with the United Nations Development Fund for Women, a job she held for 13 years. And there she encountered some highly disturbing realities.

Joanne Sandler

I remember, for instance, going to an office in Eastern Europe, that was a regional hub for the United Nations. And I remember somebody joking with me about how there was a room in that office.

It was a fairly large office that had a couch or a day bed in it that was reserved for the head of that regional office, a man, to use when he came to visit from New York. But there was a big wink of the eye. When I was told that, and I knew and I think everybody knew that he was a man who had girlfriends who, I don't know the details of his relationships with women, particularly young women. But I think it was an open secret, that that's what he did and that that room was for him.

And when I think back on it was probably, in the mid-90s. I think, why didn't I report him? Why didn't I go back and talk to somebody about that, but I didn't, I didn't.

And there were many instances of incidents like that where you knew and you heard about actions and practices that were wrong, that actually contradicted the policies and agreements we made with each other by people who had a lot of power in a system.

But to some extent, we all often looked the other way, or, if not look the other way at least learnt to live with it.

Srilatha Batliwala

So we can see that in organizations, a lot of these inequalities, biases and privileges are usually hidden, in what is called the deep structure of the organization. deep structures are hidden and invisible processes, where people reproduce the very power relations, they are trying to change outside

Joanne Sandler

I and so many feminists who have worked in organizations and played a leadership role in organizations that were aspiring to be feminist have had to learn to recognize the deep structures, I think about deep structures, particularly the kind of toxic deep structures a little bit the way I think about carbon dioxide, but it can be in the air, it can be killing you, and you don't see anything. And deep structures are like that.

Srilatha Batliwala

So what's going on in the deep structure of organizations? Well, here are a few signs of how deep structures operate. There are formal rules and policies, but the informal norms and expectations are quite different.

Or there are certain groups that have hidden power and influence. Sometimes, there are all sorts of informal and invisible processes influencing decision making. And despite what the organization might claim, there are certain kinds of behavior that are valued and rewarded, while other kinds of penalized

and finally, personal biases are practiced in the organizational space, even if the official policies are contrary to these. For example, biases based on homophobia, casteism, classism, based on your ethnicity, race, religion, or gender.

All of these can be practiced in very subtle ways or social privileges enjoyed in the home or in other informal social settings are carried into the organization as expectations like men expecting women to do certain kinds of jobs in the office,

like cleaning or managing food or always deferring to the views of their male colleagues in discussions. Our other guest today, Tejinder Bhogal is a consultant who has spent many years helping organizations change their internal cultures to create more healthy and enabling environments for their teams.

Tejinder Bhogal

I heard of an example of where an organization will have a norm that it will not take anybody it's not even explicit that they will not hire anybody who is not from these these these colleges or does not know how to speak good enough English or so, they will not above a certain level they will not take people of a certain kind.

Now, this may be kind of not formally there, but informally it is understood. So things of that kind, so they make up one is what is called the deep structure. And somewhere this also kind of links up with the, with the other what we call the under power.

Srilatha Batliwala

Power under is a concept developed by psycho analyst Steven Weinman, who treated people who suffered severe trauma or persistent depression, like long term domestic violence survivors, or people who were tortured, or we experienced sexual violence.

One man found that these experiences created what he called powerless rage in the survivors. And this rage when it is unhealed leads to the use of power under. Power under is the unconscious belief that the only way to avoid being a victim is by being the oppressor.

Joanne Sandler

There is a kind of logic to it, it's a perverse logic, but when you have been a member of an oppressed class, or experienced many different types of oppression in a society, when you are a woman and particularly if you are a woman, that that is from a group that is oppressed because of their identities, or, or origins.

Whether because of race or ability or gender identity, you have experienced multiple oppressions, you know them very well. perverse ways of operating become normalized. My first job my first paid job in feminist organizations was a small feminist organization named the International Women's Tribune center.

And there were only I think, eight of us or 10 of us, all feminists, many, many identified as lesbians or queer women, there was a lot of love and a lot of intimacy, we knew all the details of each other's lives.

But when it came to getting the work done, there remained hierarchies amongst us with different levels of privilege amongst us based on our titles and our knowledge and our histories. We also had practices that, looking back, were unacceptable in the way that we dealt with each other.

Srilatha Batliwala

Power under is often evident in the oppressive way. Some people use power, when they gain positions of authority. They fear that if they don't, no one will respect them, and they will become the victims.

Power and the behavior manifests in many forms in organizational spaces. Things like gossip, character assassination, sycophancy, flattery, personal favors, manipulation and sabotage, of those they see as more powerful than themselves.

These are ways by which even those who feel relatively powerless, can exercise a kind of subversive power.

Tejinder Bhogal

What happens is that it is always possible to misuse this power, because you have a power to decide that I shall give, delegate this to X or delegate to Y I made, not making things very clear, kind of prefer X over Y, there could be bias, which I don't recognize.

So I use that power to benefit X or give greater leeway to X than to Y they could be and it could play out a bit more strongly. For example, if I don't like Y, and I do not know for whatever reason I don't like that person

because of that person's sexuality or of that person's background, caste or class background where that person has studied, region that person has come from. So, it is possible that I will pay less attention to that person, it is possible that I will not. I will not be so fulsome in my praise to that person.

It's possible that I'll ignore the points being made by the person, etc, etc. So that's how the pa.. the bias starts operating. So that's why we say the power is starting to get wrongly utilized.

Srilatha Batliwala

An organization's visible power structure is in its stated mission, its formal rules and policies, and its official hierarchy and decision making process, but an organization's invisible power and deep structure profoundly influenced the way it functions in actual practice, in who is valued, who is not how decisions are made, whose voices are heard, and who is silenced.

Joanne Sandler

I remember when I first started doing feminist work, I mentioned I was with the International Women's Tribune center. And there was another kind of emerging transnational feminist organization based in Europe. And we met that the two organizations met very small staff.

And I remember that somebody raised early on from the tribune center, that the tribune center, the majority of women that worked at the tribune center were lesbians, whereas the majority of women that worked in the other organization were straight.

And that because they were heterosexual, intended to be married, with husbands who had jobs, that they were able to work more easily, and their organization needed less money needed fewer resources than we did, as lesbians, because, obviously, women are earn less in, in the society, particularly at that time.

And so, these questions of what privilege you bring, and what that privilege calls on you to do, I think are really important to raise and fraught.

Tejinder Bhogal

So, when you take the traditional view of hierarchy, obviously, this is totally opposite to what I would call democratic or equitable process. But if you were to take the real meaning that hierarchy implies that you have decision making at different rules for different at different levels, that there is autonomy, within that role, there is respect for the holder of that role.

Let me also extend that and this would also mean that if there is somebody, irrespective of what level they are in the organization, there is something which is troubling them at a personal level, there is some something which has happened in that family, which has happened, that they are personally injured or ill or whatever the level, the way of dealing with the person would have to be the same.

It cannot be that everybody drops working the word just because the director has gone, has become ill, but don't bother at all not and not considered as somebody who's just working in the field falls ill.

So there is an equal concern for each individual. And so that's where the democratic and equitable process there. At the same time, you have a hierarchy, which is working.

Srilatha Batliwala

So the heart of building feminist organizational cultures, is about recognizing and addressing all the forms of power operating within ourselves and our organizations, not just once in a while, but as an ongoing process.

Joanne has a great story for us about her time at UNIFEM, when she conducted workshops with her colleagues, using some conflict resolution models that she had been working with.

Joanne Sandler

But again, very much based on, kind of how you get to a win-win. I think I was leading an exercise. And one of my colleagues, my very good and brilliant colleagues in the room at some point stood up and said, and this colleague was Palestinian said, "I'm so sick and tired of you white Americans talking about win-win. Now, that's a fantasy. Maybe in your world, you get to win-win. But in our world, most of the time, there are winners and losers. And that's it." And it was such a major moment for me.

Again, back to deep structures of recognizing that deep structure, and how my privilege enabled me to imagine a world where everybody wins. While for so much of the world, just that thought is an impossibility.

And just to say it took a huge, I think it took a lot of courage for my colleague to stand up and say that at that moment, and it requires that kind of courage for us to collectively heal and repair.

The kind of harm we do to each other by assuming that everybody starts on home base.

Srilatha Batliwala

The great thing about having the ability To analyze power structures, as we did in the first episode of this podcast, and as we do in the CREA primer All About Power, is that power analysis tools can be used to change organizations too, if and when we want to.

Tejinder Bhogal

If the organization is committed to change, there are various ways to go about it. I mean, if of course, if there is no commitment or is just lip service to it, then nothing can be done.

So, we start off with that they are primarily are interested that we want to become different, we want to become better, we want to become more of, let's say less patriarchal, we want to be more equal, we'd want to be less discriminatory, all that commitment is there at a start you can do, maybe you can get yourself assessed

Srilatha Batliwala

Here Tejinder is reminding us that self-assessment at both individual and organizational levels is critical to the process of transforming organizations.

There are plenty of tools out there for this, such as the gender work framework for assessing whether an organization is gender bland, gender blind, gender neutral, gender aware, or gender transformative.

But as Tejinder points out, the questions go deeper than just do you employ women? Do you employ an equal number of women and men or women at all levels of the organization? Not just the lower ones?

What are the demographics of the women? Are they only from a certain caste or class? And then, of course, to go beyond these numbers and ask, how are women treated here?

Are their voices heard and respected? Are their priorities and approaches considered and valued? Do they feel safe here, physically, and mentally?

Tejinder Bhogal

But if you're going to talk of going beyond that, then you need to go even further. I mean, I know a few organizations which have tried this thing, okay, by, we should get out, everybody should be involved in the toilet cleaning.

So you have every day kind of given to each different individuals to take up this, this thing that we're going to clean the toilet. Now, this is a huge challenge.

But if the organization is able to do it, you can look at the kind of deep mind shifts that will take place in the organization, the kind of debates it will raise the kind of awareness it will raise about this deeper level of discrimination which people carry.

Joanne Sandler

It starts with you. And that is very trite. And it's really mind blowing that it took us so long to get there. In practice, because from the earliest days, right, the feminist mantra, the personal is political.

And then the reverse, the political is personal, has accompanied us both conceptually, and I think we've tried in practice. And yet still, the idea the recognition that you have to work on yourself,

You have to be the change, you have to model that behavior, and you will make mistakes. And we need to be kind to each other, and accepting of each other, and find ways to be honest with each other and supportive of each other. It sounds quite simple. And it's a lot of work.

Srilatha Batliwala

Changing organizational cultures is a lot of work. But that's what being a feminist is. It's about working within your own space, and demanding better of yourself and your colleagues, because the personal is political.

And it's also about building structures and ways of working that reflect your values and goals for the larger society. So on reflection, we can identify at least five critical steps that you have to take to transform an organizational space.

First, undertake an honest, deep and critical evaluation of the organizational environment to understand where the problems are, and what needs to change.

Second, identify and analyze the damaging deep structure dynamics that are at work that are not always visible, and make a concrete plan for reducing, for eliminating this.

Third, work on yourself and support others to do the same, because you may be part of the problem. focus particularly on recognizing any power and the behavior that needs to change in yourself, or in others.

Fourth, create a concrete and transparent plan for change with clear goals, timelines, and responsibilities. This means a system of accountability and assessment to make sure you stay on the path of transformation.

And finally, find ways to recognize and reward and celebrate good practices and positive innovations that foster a healthy feminist organizational culture. Think of it this way: If we can't change the small

spaces of our organizations that are under our control, to reflect our goals of equality, inclusion and justice, why do we imagine we can change the world at large?

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.

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