

## **Episode 6: Leadership(script)**

### **Arundhati Sridhar**

Leadership must look like it must look extremely sort of stripped of ego and sort of serving the larger cause of the movement, it must look like there is incredible care that is embedded in leadership within movements because you sort of instinctively learn to pick up when somebody else is starting to drop off and say, okay, I think I can sense that you need rest and that I can take over.

And at the same time, not feel challenged when somebody else does that to me in that whole process. So I think yeah, it looks like solidarity, it looks like optimism also.

### **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 sixth episode of Think Feminist. This episode of the podcast focuses on leadership.

Specifically, what does it mean to think about leadership from a feminist perspective? For our first guest, Ramyata Limbu, who is a filmmaker and journalist from Nepal, it's a question to which the answer evolved in her own journey as a feminist activist, and mentor.

### **Ramyata Limbu**

When you mean a leader, it doesn't have to be someone in power or authority or like a very male figure that we often think about, or like a political leader that we often have an image or think about, that someone who is just questioning or doing trying to do something about dismantling these structures that are so entrenched, and that basically kind of control and rule lives just questioning

### **Arundhati Sridhar**

From your past perspective converges with my own definition of feminist leadership, as a process of transforming ourselves, our societies, and the larger world to embrace an advance a feminist vision of social justice.

### **Srilatha Batliwala**

It's not about authority and control. It is about dismantling discriminatory structures of power, whether they be visible, hidden, or invisible. This is something Ramyata saw in action, as she was making 'Sorry Soldiers', a documentary film that followed six women on both sides of the armed conflict in Nepal in the 1990s between the Maoists and the Nepalese army.

### **Ramyata Limbu**

One was an elder lady in a rural village in western Nepal. One was a human rights activist. One was a woman whose daughter had been disappeared during the conflict. One was a young college student activist, and one young lady had just joined the Nepalese army.

But what I didn't realize was that each of them in their own specific roles that they played or what they were doing, were practicing feminist leadership. They basically believed in a more just equal society, they were basically fighting for their human rights.

They were engaging and collaborating with other women or other people constituencies like themselves for a common cause. They were questioning our deeply entrenched structures, not patriarchal structures.

They were questioning why women should be targeted, or women should be vulnerable during a conflict, why they should be the targets. They were raising their voice against the atrocities that were happening during the conflict in their villages, they were organizing our men among themselves and actually challenging what was basically happening.

### **Arundhati Sridhar**

There are many reasons why feminist leadership is different from the patriarchal idea of leadership. The first is that feminist leadership is about leading for a larger purpose, that is to dismantle patriarchy and the other power structures through which it operates. It is not about who's the boss, or about exercising power over others, or being the hero or Shero or savior.

### **Ramyata Limbu**

When you're talking about an ideology, or a political party, and women engaged or involved, are associated with political parties, sometimes the agenda of the political party, or the ideology of that political party defines what they do or what they're trying to do.

Obviously, the dictates of the party kind of dictates how they're supposed to behave, what they're supposed to believe in. But once after the decade long, after the peace process, the conflict ended, there was a peace process.

And that's the time when you actually kind of reflect, and it's in hindsight that perhaps, this was the way they did women practiced it or didn't even may be or didn't even understand that they were actually practicing feminist leadership.

### **Srilatha Batliwala**

The second difference is rooted in the feminist principle, the personal is political. This means that feminist leadership must begin with the self with recognizing our own internalized power, patriarchy, privilege, rage, fear, all our psychic baggage,

It is about changing our own individual practice of power. It also means that feminist values and politics have to be reflected in all the spaces we occupy, all the roles we play, all the institutions we build, and that patriarchal institutions have to be transformed to reflect these values.

### **Ramyata Limbu**

Theory, conceptual understanding is important. But also, to sing it in your, in our personal and professional lives, or trying to practice it in our personal or professional lives, I think, is much, much more difficult.

And we really have to try struggle and be very conscious, be very self-aware about trying to practice leadership and the feminist in the feminist understanding

### **Srilatha Batliwala**

the challenges that we experience and internalize these feudal and patriarchal models of power, in almost all the spaces in which we've lived and learned from our earliest childhood,

It's what we see in the family, in school, in both informal and formal spaces that we occupy. So it can be quite hard to move away from those internalized patterns when we come into leadership roles ourselves.

### **Ramyata Limbu**

We say the personal is the political, but sometimes, because of our condition, conditioning, our backgrounds, a religion, or caste or class, all these different things. They hold us back; the first step is trying to consciously understand that there is injustice.

And if we're not happy with it, we need to do something about it, we need to address it. So I think that is the first step, being self-aware, conscious, and trying to transform ourselves. But I think that is a process. And it takes time.

But once we start that, then I think we're on the way to becoming feminist leaders, or at least trying to be done, feminist leaders.

### **Srilatha Batliwala**

I believe that feminist leadership has four facets, or four Ps I call them, power, principles, purpose, and practices. If our practice of power is balanced and mediated by our principles, and the purpose for which we are leading, then our practices will come closest to the ideal of feminist leadership.

But there are three kinds of barriers that stop us often from achieving this balance whether we know it or not. The first barrier is the self. It's our own histories, our own experiences with power, our social conditioning, and how all these have shaped us,

The second barrier is the deep structures in our organizations, which we discussed at length in an earlier episode of this podcast. And these are the ways in which all kinds of biases are practiced in hidden, or even unconscious ways.

And the third barrier is power under which we also discussed in the episode on organizations. This is the unhealed trauma that makes us act oppressively. Because we unconsciously believe that the best way to avoid being oppressed is to be oppressive to others.

### **Ramyata Limbu**

I've been very conscious in what I do in my I think, I become very conscious and self-aware, or I try to be I try to be more conscious and self-aware about how I engage in my personal and professional life,

how I deal with my colleagues, how I run or run the organization, and at home, how I engage with my family, my children, my husband, and my extended family, the choices I make, and I kind of find myself questioning sometimes.

Why have I made those choices? Why am I doing this? Maybe I should do it? What would the, how would a feminist thing at react or behave?

### **Srilatha Batliwala**

I think most of us in feminist organizations have had this kind of lightbulb moment. Being a feminist or leading a feminist organization does not make you a feminist leader. Becoming a feminist leader requires effort, it requires critical self-awareness, and self-transformation, as well as systemic change.

And this requires external guidance and internal effort. We have to consciously dismantle our own internalized models of power, as well as the hierarchies that we have reproduced. We have to overcome the isolation, the pressure to deliver results, that often comes with formal leadership roles.

### **Ramyata Limbu**

I actually admire and I feel I can learn a lot from younger, younger women, and what they're doing and my wife or the wider players that I work with. I'm seeing how they address certain problems, how they deal with issues in their lives and in their organizations.

So I think it's a two-way process. It's collaborative and very open. Empowering process to learn from each other. And I think that that's what that is also what is part of the feminist leadership process.

### **Srilatha Batliwala**

So what does feminist leadership look like in practice, our second guest, Arundhati Sridhar is an inner base Program Coordinator with Gender at Work. And she has a great example to share with us from rural Gujarat.

Arundhati talks about the Jagya Apnee campaign, which was a movement of young women from marginalized communities to reclaim digital and physical spaces.

They did everything from filming themselves using phones in public places, to demanding that girls be allowed to use the tablet computers that colleges have provided them.

### **Arundhati Sridhar**

Jagya Apnee campaign from the beginning, it didn't really have anybody sort of spearheading it, but at different points at different times. There were individuals that stepped up and said, Okay, right now I have the bandwidth. And I have the ability to help sort of be the glue at this point.

Bring people together, make sure that they are responding to what is happening, and that they themselves are being taken care of. So it was extremely bottom-up in how it decided its agendas. It decided its firms.

At one point when nobody was talking. There were maybe two or three or four people that were like holding up the conversation. At its height there were hundreds and almost thousands of young women

involved in the whole process. So this is growing and shrinking and this ebbing and flowing. This is one example that I can think of.

### **Srilatha Batliwala**

the kind of fluid leadership that Arundhati witnessed in the Jagya Apnee movement is very familiar to anyone who's had the privilege of being part of grassroots feminist movements.

These are movements that are built on centering equality, listening to people, learning from them, teamwork, collaboration, enabling others, and prioritizing people's well-being and interests over the cause, or the job or our position and authority.

### **Arundhati Sridhar**

I think leadership and movements is one of the most complex things that is right, because essentially, movements are extremely, they thrive on the idea of collective ownership movements cannot simply cannot be the bastion of individuals.

And so how do you locate then, our individual leadership within collective movements? And I think that the answer has to come from the collective? The answer has to come from what is the leadership that the collective is seeking.

### **Srilatha Batliwala**

My own experience with building grassroots movements and organizations, has led me to come up with five essential strategies for practicing feminist leadership. These are very similar to the steps for transforming organizations that we laid out in an earlier episode.

So to be a true feminist leader, the first task is to analyze yourself and align your four P's of power, principles, purpose and practices. The second is to map and analyze the deep structure dynamics of the organizations who are part of and identify where the problems are, and what needs to change.

The third is to mobilize others, to share the leadership of the transformation process to create mentoring and support systems to support all of you through the process. The fourth task is to review and revise your formal policies and processes by looking at them through a feminist lens.

Are they fair? Are they equitable? Are they transparent? Are they accessible? And the fifth is to create and enforce transparent decision making and accountability mechanisms for ensuring the change,

we need to create both individual and organizational or collective change. If we can implement these five strategies, then our organizations become a microcosm where people actually experience the different worlds that we say is possible outside.

### **Arundhati Sridhar**

feminist movements also get an incredible amount of backlash, not just in out there in society, but also very much within the household.

And so it's become so much more important in feminist movements for that to be a continuous move, moving of the baton and a passing of the baton because you can get tired so quickly, from being the person who's sort of holding it together, etc.

### **Srilatha Batliwala**

I see three critical roles for feminist leadership today, that make it so important, are three critical goals, if you like to protect and preserve, to create and construct and to resist and dismantle. Let's begin with this last.

We need to resist and dismantle all the destructive intersecting power structures that hold us back. All the policies that sustain these power structures, and to transform the cultures of dominance and violence.

One of the most powerful feminist movements that did this work of resisting was the movement against the Citizenship Amendment Act across India, which was initiated by the women of Shaheen Bagh in Delhi.

### **Arundhati Sridhar**

I think it is a powerful movement and a movement when there is an organic emergence of leadership like that. I mean, when you read about Shaheen Bagh, it was it was basic basically it started with a few women, mothers and relatives of the students that were attacked at Jamia, and it, over time, very organically became so many women that were sitting there. And so many times when we say organic, it can start to feel like oh, it was so natural that it just happened. And there can often be a taking away of the intentionality and labor, when we say organic.

But when I say organic, I don't mean that there was there was such a specific focused intentionality to how these women came together and became the face of a movement at a time when that leadership and that visibility, and that imagery was extremely important to what the movement became and what it came to represent.

When the focus of feminist leadership is to protect and preserve, we must build, revitalize and advance feminist visions of environmental justice and sustainability for instance.

### **Srilatha Batliwala**

We've strengthened measures to protect those who defend the rights of the Earth and all its living beings. From young climate activists like Greta Thunberg, to education activists, like Malala Yousafzai,

We've seen remarkable examples of leadership across the globe. As Arundhati points out, feminist leadership, has also redirected successful mass movements, like the people's health movement in India, the Jan Swasthya Abhiyan....

### **Arundhati Sridhar**

The feminist perspective, essentially strengthen that movement to say, what does it mean for a woman for a woman from a specific kind of background to be able to access primary health how does that we what does that really look like? And how does that really play out?

And how many things would a woman have to do in her personal space to be able to access this, so then the people's health movement had to move beyond what happens at the PSC level, or the Aanganwadi level and enter the household and say okay there have to be, there has to be a challenging of very, very patriarchal ideas of who gets fed what so we do need to get into the discourse of why is it that in prenatal health or in postnatal care? Pregnant women or women that have recently delivered or consistently be are consistently undernourished?

Can we just be asking for them to get better food? Or do we also need to advocate for some primary? Conversations around how does patriarchy affect nutrition? And I think that was such an important sort of shift in that movement as a whole, because it moves from a conversation about infrastructure, it moves from a conversation about access to a conversation about dignity, to a conversation about basic rights, to a conversation about decision making and agency that are all extremely complex to solve.

### **Srilatha Batliwala**

And finally, when we talk about feminist leadership that creates and constructs it means imagining new visions for the future. It means strengthening and revitalizing existing visions by mobilizing others, especially the younger generations.

As activists, advocates, campaigners, leaders, it means constructing new models for the practice of power and creating deep change.

### **Arundhati Sridhar**



Leadership must look extremely sort of stripped of ego and sort of serving the larger cause of the movement, it must look like that is incredible care. That is embedded in leadership within movements because you sort of instinctively learn to pick up when somebody else is starting to drop off and say, Okay, I think I can sense that you need rest and that I can take over and at the same time, not feel challenged when somebody else does that to me in that whole process. So I think yeah, it looks like optimism.

Also, movements are often accused of being extremely angry. And I think nobody sort of gets to the heart of where that anger lies. And I think at the heart of movements and therefore leadership of movements is an incredible and undying optimism that the world can be better and that things can be better than what they are.

Well, I'm certainly optimistic. I see some amazing experiments happening around the world. Feminists are creating new kinds of structures through which to do their work. They are breaking away from the traditional organizational framework.

### **Srilatha Batliwala**

They are experimenting with co-leadership and collective leadership. They are paying consistent attention to the use and abuse of power in their own spaces and structures. And they are prioritizing self-care and collective care as essential to the sustainability of our movements.

More and more, I see feminists, especially young feminists, breaking away from the old paradigm of leadership, and building creative new models of shared power, decision making, and voice. Each innovation brings with it new challenges, of course, but in the process, we are learning a lot about the essence of feminist leadership.

And remember, you can read more about feminist leadership and let's practice in Korea's concept papers, feminist leadership for social transformation, and toolkit, achieving transformative feminist leadership, both available on our website at [Crea.world.org](http://Crea.world.org).

Thank you for listening. We hope you enjoyed Crea's podcast series Think Feminist, and are moving forward with a useful set of concepts and tools to apply in the work that you do. If you've missed any of the previous episodes, you will find them online.

Do also check out our website and follow us on Twitter and Instagram @Think.Crea. We hope to be back soon with further episodes that enrich the work of feminist activists. Until then, take care and goodbye.

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