

# feminist in the making

by Luz Maria Martinez

## “What is feminism?”

I suppose that it's the desire or attempt on the part of women or of men to create a society where inequality does not exist in the widespread way that is now all over the world. I don't think that only women can be feminists. I think that men who feel strongly enough that there should be equality regardless of sex can be feminists as well.”

These words tumbled out of Kamaljit Bhasin, or Mito as she prefers to be called, a talented 16-year old student at a boarding school in the south of India who also happens to be the daughter of the foremost Indian feminist Kamla Bhasin. Together, Mito and Kamla attended the Women's World Conference in Beijing where Mito performed a classical Indian dance.

Mito likes to talk about the situation of women in her country India. “There, you see more women going out of the house, walking, expressing their opinions. There is progress but I don't think it is very dramatic. It's taking a lot of time, evolving slowly that I don't think it's something people can see in a period of five or 10 years. The issues my mother talked about 10 years ago are the same issues she is talking about now. These problems do not have immediate solutions.”

Mito thinks that these problems, especially the problem of social inequality, are difficult because they are not always explicit. She points to an experience she had in school as proof. “The school that I go to is one of the most progressive in India but even there, teachers, grown-ups and even kids make a clear distinction between the roles of girls and boys. For instance, even if a girl is very bright

she would be encouraged to go into the humanities and not into the sciences when she chooses her subjects after the 10th standard. When the time came for me to choose, I knew I wanted to go into humanities. But my mother wanted to see how the teachers would respond if I had chosen differently so she came to the school and asked them what I should do and a physics professor very clearly said that “girls don't have brains.” Naturally, my mother pounced on him.

“But opinions like that are quite widespread. Ninety percent of the girls in India would go for humanities and commerce and avoid the sciences. Clearly you have teachers who think that girls should study home sciences because after all they are supposed to get married.”

This is why Mito feels that it is important for women to get involved in the women's movement. “If we want to solve the problems we face, we need to get organized. We can sit back and do nothing but that is not going to get us anywhere. I do think young girls my age do feel strongly about gender and equality and women's issues generally. I think they would be willing to mobilize, although it is very difficult in a situation like in India. There are so many restrictions against expressing one's self. Things are not as bad for those who are economically better but for a large majority of young people, the situation is very difficult—for girls as well as for boys. There is a lot of pressure on the families about the image they project of themselves.

“This is why I am, oh most definitely, a feminist.” ☺