

Gender Mainstreaming: An Obsolete Concept?

A Conversation between Two Long-Time Feminist Activists

This conversation took place in Sri Lanka in August 2004 during a rare free moment when Sunila Abeysekera and Marilee Karl sat down together to reflect on concerns about gender mainstreaming in the women's movement today.

Marilee: Gender mainstreaming is an idea that has been around for a long time and there are ongoing attempts to mainstream gender into United Nations agencies, their programmes and projects, government policy-making bodies, and many other institutions. Gender mainstreaming has become a mantra.

In recent years, some donor agencies that have traditionally provided funding to women's groups, organisations, networks and projects have cut out this funding—sometimes in a very sudden way—giving as their reason that gender should now be mainstreamed into all programmes and projects and that there is no need for separate women's organisations and projects.

I would love to hear your reflections and explore with you the concept and practice of gender mainstreaming.



Marilee Karl

Marilee (middle) and Sunila (second from the right) with other Sri Lankan women at the Women's Media Collective's office in Sri Lanka.

Sunila: In the women's human rights movement, when we first talked about mainstreaming gender concerns, we did it from the point of view that there was a need to take into consideration the differences between men and women in their ability to enjoy human rights. In the human rights movement in those days, there was no concern for what was happening specifically to women. Because of the exclusion of women as individuals and the exclusion of women's concerns and the specific rights abuses faced by women, we worked to include gender-specific information and analyses in the national and international documentation prepared for the World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna in 1993.

This was a complex issue. But if you look at what passes for gender mainstreaming today, it spans the gamut of the inclusion of women's concerns in policies and government. This confuses the issue. Many people who are doing gender mainstreaming today do not even understand the concept of gender.

Marilee: It seems that "gender mainstreaming" is often used to mean greater inclusion of women. But gender actually refers to both men and women, and more specifically, to the roles that different societies, cultures and traditions assign to men and women. So it makes sense to be sensitive to gender roles and look at how institutions, laws, projects, etc. affect men and women differently. The real usefulness of raising awareness about gender has been to show that there are differences in opportunities and possibilities for men and women to exercise their rights. One size does not fit all. This is fine as far as it goes, but it does not go far enough. It also obscures the complexity of the issues.

Sunila: Gender mainstreaming as it is done now does not challenge the patriarchal system, so it is very attractive to governments and donors. They are putting a lot of money and resources into this because it is safe. Besides, the danger of using the concept "gender" is that it constantly allows for the dislocation of women specific concerns. While it seems to be more 'inclusive,' that is, it allows for both men and women, in fact, it leads to the neglect of women's concerns. It is a way of dislocating women from the centre of the discussion.

Marilee: It is the old, discredited "add-women-and-stir principle"—a new version of the 1970s and 1980s slogan of "integrating women in development." Our feminist critique then and now is that we do not want to integrate or mainstream women into patriarchal systems without changing them. Uncritical mainstreaming of women could mean drowning women in the "male stream." If we can enter the mainstream in sufficient numbers and with sufficient strength and a strong ability to challenge and change the mainstream, only then does it make sense to mainstream women.

Sunila: Just having physical female bodies in and of itself has its uses, but it does not challenge gender roles if there is no feminist consciousness behind it. Why call it gender mainstreaming if you are only trying to increase the presence of women in the bureaucracy and governance?

Marilee: Some women have argued that there must be a critical mass of women in institutions, politics and public life in order for women to make a difference. Some sociological studies have estimated this

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“critical mass” to be about 30 percent. But we have seen that increasing numbers of women inside institutions and politics does not necessarily make a difference. Without a feminist consciousness and challenging patriarchy, more women on the inside may not make any difference at all. And we need to be clear about what we mean by feminism.

In response to the horrors of the torture and abuse of prisoners in Iraq’s Abu Ghraib prison, in which women were involved, Barbara Ehrenreich wrote: “...we need a kind of feminism that aims not just to assimilate into the institutions that men have created over the centuries, but to infiltrate and subvert them. To cite an old, and far from naïve, feminist saying, ‘If you think equality is the goal, your standards are too low.’ It is not enough to be equal to men, when men are acting like beasts. It is not enough to assimilate. We need to create a world worth assimilating into.” (published in the *Los Angeles Times*, 16 May 2004).

Sunila: Gender mainstreaming is an obsolete concept because in other areas of analysis, we have developed an understanding of the intersectionality of oppression and discrimination. We know that your gender identity and your sex identity, which are different one from the other, form only a part of your totality. Other aspects of who you are like your class, religion, education can all play a role in positioning you within these power structures.

And so, these days, if you talk about mainstreaming only for women, you have to confront the question of which women and you also come into a contentious or contending relationship with other marginalised communities also struggling to be in the mainstream. For example, the dalit or indigenous peoples.

Marilee: The concept of intersectionality is not really a new concept.

Sunila: The concept of intersectionality is a very real experiential aspect of our activism. In every country, it is an internal conflict. Women find that they must constantly shift their positioning in terms of issues from the point of view of being women and from the point of view of being members of communities under

threat, so women are constantly juggling this concept of intersectionality.

Marilee: In the 1970s, some of us in the feminist movement talked about how race, class, and sex — and other aspects of our identities, are interwoven. I like this image, because all these elements are woven together in different ways to create a tapestry of our different identities. They do not just intersect at fixed points.

Sunila: In terms of mainstreaming, I think it is very important to have women as a body within the structures of power, but we should have some kind of strategic approach to these women to make sure that they are aware of the issues. There is no guarantee that they know the issues just because they are women.

At the same time, we need to have new strategies to build alliances with other emerging social movements. The only way we can talk about feminist organising and mobilising for real social transformation is if we can figure out with whom we can ally at which moment.

Don’t you think it is interesting that the words organising and mobilising have been replaced by the words lobbying and advocacy? In this vocabulary shift, you see the political shift.

I see this especially in the activities of the women’s movement around the United Nations conferences and documents, especially the Beijing Conference on Women. The Beijing Platform for Action represents some advances in terms of women’s positions in society, but it is a compromise document and it is the result of negotiations between States and international agencies. The funniest and saddest thing is that many in the women’s movement consider themselves to be bound to the Platform for Action while the States that negotiated it have proceeded to pay very little attention to it. Many feminists feel it is our framework—yet we are not responsible for it at all.

One of the things that really make me happy is that many strong women’s activist organisations around the world are not interested in framing their activism around the Beijing Review process. If you look at the kinds of groups that participated in the Asia-Pa-

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cific Forum for Beijing +10, you will find that these mainly consisted of academic women within university structures, women’s studies and gender studies, and women within state and non-state institutions. The women who have been most active in Asia-Pacific region, like the indigenous women, or lesbian, bisexual, or transgendered persons, or women who work on the issues of migration and sex work, were absent from the main deliberations. They were there, but they were organising their own events. This is a fairly telling comment on the state of things.

From a feminist movement that demanded women’s right to control their bodies in the 1960s, we are

now reduced to taking various convoluted paths to stay away from the issue of abortion. Every time I want to talk about abortion, people want to reference it to the Beijing Platform for Action. Why? Why are we so desperate for permission to speak about it? It seems that everything the women’s movement does today has to be referenced to UN documents. This is useful some of the time, but it cannot be what we do all of the time.

Marilee: We need to get back to more feminist organising and mobilising. Definitely the donors are wrong if they really think that women do not need to organise as women anymore—that we can just be “mainstreamed.” It takes strong, organised women in order to change the patriarchal power structures. It may very well be that the donors know this and that their strategy is to weaken women’s challenges of patriarchy by taking away funds from women’s groups, organisations and networks, and putting them into “mainstreaming.”

Sunila: We need to do more feminist organising and we need to do some serious bridge building with women who are in other social movements to make the connection between what happens to women as women and what happens to other marginalised communities. For example, the struggle of indigenous peoples for the right to control their land and the issue of indigenous women’s rights to own land on their own are both present in feminist agendas, yet often placed in opposition to one another. We need to be more strategic in these matters. If we do this, we can make an impact. ♪

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