

Young, Lesbian, Or Activist? Or All?¹

by Kaushalya Perera



I used to walk over to my grandfather's home years ago, as a teenager, barefoot and with my hair untied. He used to sometimes say to me, "Why don't you tie up your hair? Why are you going around like Kuveni?"²

Growing up in Sri Lanka, one would hear over and over the founding myth of the Sinhalese people. Vijaya, a so-called prince, comes from northern India with 700 followers and lands on the Sri Lankan shores. One of his men sees a female dog and follows it, and his 700 followers go off in search of their companions who go before them, and, one by one, all are lost. When Vijaya finally decides to search for his men, he sees the woman who "sat at the foot of a tree spinning." There is no mention that she was a beautiful woman then; it is later that she transforms herself into a sixteen-year-old. But now, in popular memory,

Kuveni, the woman, has transposed into "the beautiful woman who seduced Vijaya."

Kuveni has always been one of my favourite characters. Not for this part of the story that I have narrated so far but for the latter part of the story that I will narrate now. After Vijaya terrorises her with his "manly strength," she returns all his men. That same night, she promises to help him kill her relatives, the Yakshas,³ in the nearby city so that he can stay on as prince. Once Vijaya takes over the area, he sends for an Indian princess and throws out Kuveni, who takes with her their two children. Kuveni is killed by her relatives when she goes back to find them.

The story of this woman who has become imbued with notions of sexuality and violence surfaces in my thoughts from time to time. At what

point did Kuveni, the woman who loved an “outsider,” the woman who gave Vijaya a kingdom, the woman who did not want to leave her children behind, become replaced with Kuveni the woman who lay in wait for men, the woman who seduced Vijaya, the woman who killed her relatives? Sometime after joining the Women’s Support Group (WSG) in Sri Lanka, I suddenly remembered my grandfather’s comment about Kuveni, and I started thinking about what the popular conception of her says about our cultural perception of women. For me, Kuveni is an embodiment of the problem that has followed women through the ages in a heteronormative society.

Must we, as women, erase ourselves of all traces of sexuality and desire to be accepted as “people”? And linked to this is the other question that we who love “outsiders,” as Kuveni did, have to deal with: Must we, as women who love women (“outsiders” in a social sense), erase any show of desire to be accepted by other women (our relatives)?

In the rest of this article, I discuss what it is like to be a young lesbian activist in Sri Lanka at present. And we will see these two questions coming up again and again.

Even though my politics had been woman-oriented for a long time, I entered the world of formal or official activism at a relatively late stage. Sometime in my mid-twenties, I went through a transition in my personal life. I decided that I would live my life as a lesbian. I knew enough about the problems that were faced by anyone “different” in terms of gender and/or sexuality in Sri Lanka to feel guilty about the acceptance and support shown to me by my close friends and colleagues. In a country where homosexual sexual activity is a criminal offence, where people lose their jobs or family, or both, for loving the same sex/gender, I seemed to have “too much” in a sense. In this country where many others stifle their identities and live a mask (out of necessity), I could be who I was to a degree that many others could not. I had to do something. Not something that grabs headlines but some action contributing to a positive change in the community to which I now belonged. This was my reason for seeking out the WSG.

The WSG was born in 1999. A handful of women had joined Companions on a Journey, the first gay group in the country, and formed the WSG as a support

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group for lesbian, bisexual and transgender (LBT) people. As the two organisations evolved, the need for the WSG to have a separate identity and space became apparent, and it moved out to a separate office. I joined the WSG four years later in 2003, and by that time it had a floating membership of about 20 women. The WSG has had several projects over the last few years that are an extension of our main agenda: support for women who reach out to the WSG through various means (financial support, accommodation, psychological and legal counselling, peer support). We have successfully carried out “The Clothesline Project,” a visual media to portray and protest against violence against women. We have run several awareness and sensitisation workshops in rural areas of Sri Lanka for women community leaders; worked with sex workers in the capital; held women’s cricket tournaments; done media campaigns by advertising in newspapers at critical moments such as elections; and networked with other rights groups. And like most other small

groups, we have also been dogged by issues of finding funds and volunteers.⁴ But beyond those administrative issues, there have been other obstacles to overcome—the personal and the organisational are tied together in these.

Sri Lankan society is very hierarchical. To command respect, you must be male, older (or senior), from a certain class background, engaged in a “socially acceptable profession,” and, hopefully, fluent in English. Most of the activists in our group lose out on the two most important criteria—masculinity and seniority. Additionally, we are active in what is, presently, the bottom of the ladder of rights work in Sri Lanka. Thus, any activism we engage in within Sri Lanka becomes a negotiation with this scheme of power, and it is a double struggle—first you negotiate for the right to be taken seriously and then you have to make yourself heard about that very taboo subject of sexuality. As young women, we sometimes hear an older person say something extremely discriminatory or biased, and we remain silent because we feel that we cannot disagree with what has been said. Disagreement with content is generally taken as disrespect for the individual.

It is in this context that we enter the discussion of sexual rights in Sri Lanka. An organisation has to work together with others in order to succeed. In the rights movement, it is important that we all unite in lobbying against common opponents. But as we all know, it is good in theory but difficult in practice.

Three years ago, I started to participate in as many women's meetings as possible in Sri Lanka as a member of the WSG. The WSG members are generally the youngest and most junior members in these forums. Our agenda is to bring up sexual rights at every possible juncture, such as being included in the discussion of the meetings in which we participate. But herein lie the issues. Sexual rights is a "young" part of rights work. Both the topic and its activists are "young." Whenever we enter that space of women's rights and human rights, we

During the "Consultative Review Meeting for Beijing +10" in 2004, for instance, our coordinator and I had a difficult time convincing the majority of other women activists of the importance of including reproductive rights in the list of priority issues. While pushing for reproductive rights, we were very much aware that had we suggested sexual rights, too, it would not have been acceptable to the others.

Reciprocity is another frustration. In most instances that the WSG is invited to forums, it is expected by the other groups that we will participate. But in the event that the WSG itself organises an event, the participation of women's rights groups is not as visible. In the list of priority events that other organisations must attend, it somehow appears that ours is low priority. Even women's rights organisations that do send representatives tend to send their junior members or younger staff members to our events. So we are again confronted with the seniority question: To what extent do our issues figure in the work that is done within that organisation, and does the junior staff member really get a chance to use the knowledge that she gained at our discussions to contribute to the discussion in her own organisation? In June this year, the WSG held an "Inter-Organisational Meeting" in Colombo. Several well-known women's organisations as well as individuals and groups working in the health sector, legal issues, and other interests were invited. There were very few senior members of women's groups who attended the meeting.

Add to this another factor related to seniority, this time having to do with organisations and not individuals.



WSG file photo

One of the sexual health workshops WSG conducts outside of Colombo.

literally feel like intruders. It has not been easy to make the more senior women's rights activists feel that sexual rights is as important as the issues that they generally tend to espouse, such as violence against women, women in the peace process, economic independence, participation in the political system, and other issues.

This is my personal frustration with the women's rights groups in Sri Lanka, and it might not necessarily be how ALL young activists feel, but I do know it to be problematic to some others. Nationally, regionally, and internationally, the "movement" is composed of individuals and groups with many different agenda. The movement in Sri Lanka is made up of smaller grassroots level organisations (such as the farming women's organisations); more urban organisations that liaise with these organisations; and a handful of organisations that are based in Colombo, which have international networking capabilities and a bigger base of power. My perspective of the movement in the country has been that with time, it has become a conservative middle-class institution that has lost its radical edge.

As WSG members, some of us have experienced meetings where month-long discussions are held to decide on the most urgent issues concerning the abuse and harassment of women. It was not that activists from these more institutionalised organisations did not feel the urgency. They did, but in turning it into action there were logistical issues to be considered that to them were insurmountable, and for us, incidental.

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So if it is as frustrating, or as negative, as I say, why do we continue to participate in the women's rights movement? In a very pragmatic sense, it is because we need to! As a small group of women fighting for a big issue, we need to form alliances with the women's rights networks. To make sure that our agenda on sexual rights is taken forward, we remain in contact, and we try to cling to the centre of power.

However, there is another more important reason. We ARE women. Everything the women's rights groups are fighting for is important to us. If the women's rights movement is taking decisions and making changes, they affect us. If the women's groups are pushing for anti-domestic violence laws, then it is in our interest to make sure that the queer voice is also included, because domestic violence affects us, too.

And it is not the case that we do not have allies. Important and senior women's rights activists have been truly supportive and encouraging in showing us possible spaces for intervention. In most cases, it is because of their own political convictions and a belief that sexual rights are human rights. Sometimes, it has been because both parties, the WSG and them, can gain from the activities that we undertake. Our sexual rights workshops could not have started off without the support of other women's rights organisations. The "Clothesline Project" has been a collaborative effort, too. Most of all, the LBT support services have been a site of cooperation. Members with psychological and legal counselling



WSG file photo

An inter-organisational workshop held last year on homophobia.

needs are seen by counsellors working for other women's rights groups. This arrangement creates a reciprocal bond, further tightening the networking within groups and building awareness of one another's merits.

Lastly, the most vital factor is that we see our progress. The WSG has gained a certain amount of visibility by constantly attending and speaking (loudly) at meetings and forums. Every time we do it, it becomes just a bit easier for the next round. Three years ago, the WSG undertook a project that would have been unthinkable a decade ago: conducting sexual rights and sexual health awareness workshops in rural Sri Lanka. With the help of another women's rights group in Colombo, we approached a few women community leaders in rural areas and asked for help in organising workshops in their home areas. Our agenda was to sensitise the areas' women leaders on issues like gender, sexual health, sexual rights,

and other issues. In most instances, the community asked us for more such events because this had been their first open discussion on sex, gender, sexuality, and rights. In our first-ever workshop, we were told that there are no lesbians in that area. When we met the community people again a year later, these opinions had changed somewhat. These changes, changes that need years to show up, give the WSG reason to go on within the women's movement.

Women are not the only community to which the WSG belongs. The WSG is also homosexual. This means that we straddle two movements—the women's rights movement and the sexual rights movement. And from within the sexual rights movement comes the next source of conflict. Until very recently, there were only two lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) organisations in Sri Lanka: the COJ supporting the men and the WSG supporting the women. It is important for these two organisations to work together, and when they do, it is clear to both that each of them focuses on issues different from those of the other organisation. The sexual rights movement with the men is dominated by the health discourse, but this is not the primary issue for WSG (even though we recognise it as an important cause and support it actively).

These points of departure in activism does not mean that we live in segregation. There have been many instances of coming together in social settings. There is a very underground

but active gay culture in Colombo and, in any given month, there might be at least one party, although the men far outnumber the women. The issue of gender within the gay movement never became a major issue for me until an incident that took place at one such party. My partner was helping to clear the floor for a dance event when two men in drag persisted in dancing in such a way that people nearby could not see the dance event on the cleared space. My partner's request that the two men move back a bit to let others see the event resulted in an argument and then a physical fight. After the fight was settled, we

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were accosted by a group of drag queens that was very upset by what it perceived to be an insult to one of its "sisters." There was no physical fight in this instance, but the language that the group used was abusive in the extreme. The drag queens' main point of contention was that my partner should not have hit their friend because "she (my partner) was a woman and had no right to hit a man."

This incident is not a common one. Gay men and lesbians in Sri Lanka do not come to fisticuffs everyday. But

I have chosen to give this very personal and extreme experience because it dramatically brings out the conflicts. This is by no means our only experience of the gender/sexuality divide. The WSG has had to face many other instances where, at times of personal or organisational differences of opinion, we are attacked on the grounds that we are *women*. These incidents are an eye-opener as to how within the gay community in Sri Lanka, sex/gender/sexuality—that very minimal space—is an area of conflict. And the queer community in the country has to find a way of working gender into their activism in the same way that the women's movement has to find a way of incorporating our queerness.

In the past few years, I have grown. The WSG has almost been a workshop for my activism. I have at times compared myself to my sister-activists and felt inadequate in the face of their courage. As activists, we learn on the job—nobody teaches us a course on "how to be an activist." Every time I go for a meeting, I have to think of whether the issues that are discussed encompass me as a woman while, at the same time, exclude me as a lesbian. And, sometimes, it is difficult to disentangle the sexual and gendered spaces. I have found ways to be diplomatic and not to be diplomatic. At times, I have felt that it is better for my organisation if I just "shut up and wait"; but, at other times, I have stuck to my guns and disagreed, however bitter the taste in my mouth.

And, sometimes, I remember Kuveni. I have asked myself where the fascination with Kuveni lies. Is it

politically incorrect for me to be fascinated by a man-loving woman? It depends on which angle your seat is. My angle is that she went against the grain—in a *yaksha* community that would have killed her for loving a “man”; she did precisely that and got killed. And I see parallels between her

outsider status and our outsider status. I also see that the society that I live in has dealt with women-loving women in a very Kuveni manner: by fixing us as objects of deviant desire. And my activism is informed with the intention that we will go as far away from Kuveni’s fate as possible. ☺

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Endnotes

1 The article is based on a presentation at the “10th AWTD International Forum on Women’s Rights and Development,” Bangkok, Thailand, October 2005.

2 Quotations are from the *Mahawamsa*, the historical text of Sri Lankan history.

3 Yakshas, Rakshas and Nagas were the original inhabitants of Sri Lanka, according to myth and the *Mahawamsa*, and are considered to be demons with supernatural powers.

4 WSG has a small office which also functions as the drop-in center for members and houses a small but valuable library on sexuality. Our administration is by one coordinator, with important decisions taken in consultation with the members.