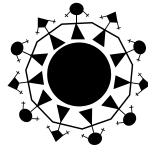


# Questioning the Answers

**A report of the XIVth Feminist Capacity Building Course  
on Gender, Sustainable Development,  
Peace and Human Rights**

**Dhulikhel, Nepal**

**21 October– 21 November 2009**



**Organised by**

**Sangat**

**A South Asian Feminist Network**

## **Questioning the Answers**

A report of the XIVth Feminist Capacity Building Course  
on Gender, Sustainable Development,  
Peace and Human Rights

*Report prepared by 2009 course participants*

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# Foreword

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**K**arl Marx famously said, “philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways; the point however is to change it”. At the cost of being immodest, we maintain that at Sangat, we attempt to do a bit of both—we talk the talk and walk the talk, as much as possible. In the case of ‘women’s issues’, there is a dire need to do both, simultaneously and consistently. Women need to know their situation, understand it, interpret it with the help of their new-found critique and then be empowered enough to change their lives, if at all.

Though Sangat set out on the mission to build and develop women’s capacities almost 25 years back, we admit that we are still a drop in the ocean. Women’s oppression, discrimination, marginalization, violence and abuse is embedded in a range of systems, concepts, structures, beliefs, value systems, ideologies, traditions, mythologies and what have you. So our task at each of these ‘capacity-building’ courses is enormous, to say the least. We first need to assist women undo themselves, that is unlearn what they have learnt and brainwashed into. This process is full of confusion. Learning to look deeper and critically at one’s beliefs and attitudes is painful. These odysseys leave them exasperated but their sparkling, new selves more than compensate for the unease.

Sangat’s innovative and off-the-wall techniques and strategies at training have borne pleasing results. Hundreds of our alumnae across South Asia – in their small and big ways – have been pushing their personal and professional horizons. Most are in touch with us, thanks to the mushrooming social networking sites. We run into them as leaders, opinion makers, trainers and even budding femocrats.

One of the first things that the 2009 alumnae did after the course was this report! Although it is based on earlier reports, it required some fresh inputs. It is therefore a first-of-its-kind effort. From collating material (including feedback), writing, editing and sourcing photographs, this report is the result of their love and solidarity for each other and their commitment to

the idea that Sangat stands for. Anisha Kansakar, Indika Samarakoon, Mona Sherpa, Prachi Khetan, Rubina Khilji, Sabrina Edwards—we thank each one of you for your time and love. Special thanks to Chitra Ahanthem for writing coordinating and collating notes and piecing it all together.

The 2009 four-week international course was held in Nepal; it was jointly organized by Sangat and Shtrii Shakti, Kathmandu. The course was supported by EED, MISEREOR, and Action Aid International Asia. CARE, OXFAM and CIDA Sri Lanka; Action Aid Nepal; RSPN, Khwendo Khor and Rozan Pakistan and CCDB Bangladesh paid for the participation of their staff.

Many other Sangat partners contributed to this course by identifying participants, acting as resource persons, coming to the course as observers, joining our social gatherings, and by appreciating what we were doing. We celebrate this solidarity which reaffirms our mutual desire to create sustainable livelihoods and lives in South Asia. We are full of admiration for the entire team of Shtrii Shakti, especially Srijana Tirwa, who helped manage the course during the entire period. We also appreciate the team of Dhulikhel Lodge Resort which supported the course with their efficient work.

As you flip through the pages of this report, you will feel the joy and energy of this process of collective learning. These feelings helped the participants learn and clarify a range of concepts and issues, develop a common understanding, create and strengthen bonds of friendship, solidarity, and deepen their commitment to equality, democracy, ecological balance, peace and human values.

All of us at Sangat are committed to carry forward these educational and networking activities in South Asia and elsewhere and to create a large cadre of women and men feminist activists. We consider it an honour to be part of these efforts for the creation of a peaceful, harmonious, democratic, gender just and green South Asia and world.

**March 2010**

**Kamla Bhasin  
Amrita Nandy  
Abha Bhaiya**

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# Introduction and background

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We are happy to share with you another story of a four-week long South Asian course and an intensive, collective learning process held outside Kathmandu between 21 October and 21 November 2009.

The participants were from some of the finest, committed and innovative feminist groups, national and international NGOs, women's studies centers, media organizations and so on. There were 39 women participants and 11 resource persons this time, while six women participated as observers in some sessions.

In addition, the participants interacted with a good number of Nepalese development workers/activists, lawyers, journalists, peace activists and women studies' teachers at the social gatherings and visits organized during the course.

This was the fourteenth such course organized by Kamla Bhasin, earlier through the FAO-NGO South Asia Programme, and now through Sangat, in collaboration with NGO partners.

Even as we recall the story, we are aware that our words cannot capture the various dimensions of the course. The intensity of personal sharing, the pain of personal narratives, the depths of discussions, the spontaneity of bursting into song and dance, the joy

of collective living and learning, and making friends are some of the most treasured moments of this collective learning process.

## What we try and what we achieve

Sangat organizes these courses to build capacities of women activists who work for women's organizations, local, national, and international NGOs, government organizations, UN agencies, media and legal organizations and so on. Our focus is to improve their understanding, analytical skills and conceptual clarity so as to make them stronger and more capable to work for equality, peace and development. The attempt is also to create/develop a feminist consciousness which would help them challenge patriarchal notions, knowledge systems, values and institutions. Hopefully, they would be able to look at the world through women's eyes so that men are not the 'subject' and women not the 'other'.

The course surfaces the connections between theory and practice. We try to make it clear that feminist scholarship is not for the sake of scholarship; it is essentially directed towards transformation. In fact, the work of the resource persons who come to these courses is an



example of this connection between academic work and women's movement. Many feminist scholars have worked on issues thrown up by the women's movement, be it reproduction, the origin of patriarchy in South Asia or the impact of neo-liberal development paradigm on working-class women.

Most participants who come to these courses have little exposure to women's studies or feminist scholarship. Many of them have not yet begun to see that most knowledge is fore-grounded on sexist bias and patriarchy. Women have had little or no role in creating formal knowledge. Women's experiences and perspectives are missing. The course helps participants understand that, for example, most history is HIS-STORY or history of men, albeit the upper class male.

Women learn to examine their own lives critically which they had not seen or questioned earlier. Their families, religious/cultural customs and practices, and even their own attitudes come under the scanner. As development workers, most of them had been looking only at women's health, credit, income-generating activities and so on in isolation of social, political or economic linkages. They had seen women's backwardness but not really asked why; they had not looked at patriarchy as a system.

Slowly, as days pass, they begin to understand patriarchy and gender, and start recognizing and naming patriarchal biases. One can see a difference in the way

they begin to describe social phenomenon and their own experiences.

## **Seeing connections, recognizing patterns**

The course also encourages participants to see connections between different institutions such as family, religion, law, the market, state and between different hierarchical systems like class, caste, gender, race and imperialism. We try systematically to move away from narrow categories which make it difficult to see the larger picture of social and economic realities.

The methodology of the course begins with personal experiences and then moves on to social systems. The fragments of individual presentations slowly form into patterns. For many participants, it is liberating to recognize that what they perceived as their individual problems turned out to be social phenomena.

In a way, for most participants the course is like a consciousness-raising group from the women's movement where women talked about their lives, pains, dilemmas and frustrations in an atmosphere of support, understanding and affirmation. The course helps participants develop a larger understanding of what being a woman means. They look at institutions that create and recreate the definitions of women and men and define their status, position, roles and behavior. Through conceptual tools, they look at social phenomena with dispassion and distance.



Lifting the veil from their unspoken lives and emotions leads to a lot of cleansing. Initially, when the painful questioning starts, there is a lot of unease and discomfort. Participants try to dodge questions. Slowly, they get the courage to look at their own subordination, their own patriarchal mindsets and values they have unconsciously or consciously internalized. Some of them get the courage to talk openly about their lives. Others take the questions along to mull over. It seems that no one goes back unchanged.

A major part of these courses is on and about peace which is not just the absence of war but comprehen-

sive human security. During these courses, participants look at historical realities from different perspectives. For example, the Tamil women from Sri Lanka enable the Sinhala women to understand their pain and recognize their own privileged positions and role in the conflict. Participants realize that everyone is an actor and responsible for what is happening around them. They recognize power and understand that each one can be and marginalized in different situations and times. Looking at reality from the perspective of the “other” helps understand conflict and resolution.





# Atmosphere, objectives, location, participants and resource persons

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## **Making friends, creating solidarity and networks**

Four weeks of living together, sharing feelings and experiences, exploring ideas, singing and dancing together, yoga and massages turned a disparate group of individuals into an extended family. Much love and affection flowed. Participants often said how much better, wholesome, peaceful and encouraged they felt during the course. *"I am glad I have my own space and time here,"* or *"I am glad I am being made to look after my body"* were some of the responses.

After a few days of being together, as resource persons left, many eyes moistened. Goodbyes and hugs were endless. At the end of the course, no one felt ashamed to cry or express sorrow. The magic of affection, giving and spontaneity worked wonders and everyone felt at home.

Thanks to the new bonds, the course became the best way to create solidarity and networks at the South Asian level. The non-competitive and supportive atmosphere made participants see through false notions of nationalities. Instead of emphasizing their

national identities, they called themselves 'regionals of South Asia'. What began as personal friendship often turned into solidarity and commitment for a peaceful South Asia.

Although a substantial amount of work has been done to sensitize development workers towards gender concerns, much remains to be done. Women's participation in decision-making (at all levels) in both government agencies and NGOs is still marginal. Opportunities for training and jobs are limited and dominant values and behavior patterns are still patriarchal. There is also a dearth of opportunities for decision-makers, workers and activists to build their knowledge and sharpen their analytical skills on gender issues. These fourteen courses have helped over 500 women to develop a socialist-feminist perspective and also create strong friendships across borders.

## **Bridging the gap between theory and practice**

Although terms such as action research, participatory research and praxis are frequently used in connection with



social movements in South Asia, there is still a huge gap between theory and practice, activists and researchers, and between being, doing and thinking. There are hundreds of activists and committed development workers who seldom have the support, time or space to read and reflect on where they are going. On the other hand, there are an equal number of academicians, researchers and theoreticians who have the map but seldom undertake the journey.

Activists may have little or no academic training in social analysis. They are often intimidated by theories which are couched in jargon. Their alienation from theory may at times play itself out as disdain or contempt for theoretical work. Without such analytical understanding, they cannot hope to find solutions.

On the other hand, there are ‘thinkers’ – academicians, researchers and theoreticians – who investigate and write about women’s issues and social change without necessarily directly experiencing the reality. Their theories and concepts are refined and elaborated through debate and discussions within their own circles that may not comprise activists and development practitioners. Thus, on many occasions, research and theory move in parallel trajectories without meeting, interacting or enriching each other.

To ensure that development programmes facilitate change, education, training and capacity-building must be incorporated. An overall understanding of systems

and processes which strengthen and perpetuate the subordination of women is required.

Sangat’s South Asian courses have emerged from the above background and perspective.

## **Objectives of the course**

The main objectives of the course are to:

- enhance the effectiveness of development programmes in South Asia, especially those that work towards greater gender sensitivity, sustainability, human rights and peace in rural areas;
- facilitate an intensive dialogue and sharing of experiences between women from different countries who work primarily for the development and empowerment of marginalized rural people, particularly women;
- enhance capacities, capabilities, self-esteem, self-confidence, sense of commitment and belonging of participants;
- help participants improve their health and control over their bodies and mind with the help of yoga, meditation, massage etc.;
- provide participants with an opportunity to increase their conceptual understanding, analytical skills, awareness and sensitivity to a range of gender and development issues and to the dynamics of



socio-economic and political change as it affects women and the poor, especially in rural areas of South Asia;

- develop a strong perspective on and commitment for just peace;
- develop ways to address issues related to sustainable agriculture and rural development, biodiversity and macro-economic policies;
- provide insights into training skills and methodologies, organizational development etc.
- provide advocacy skills on issues related to gender and sustainable development;
- identify effective written and audio-visual material and exercises for gender trainings/courses;
- evolve a common perspective and shared commitment among women and people's organizations/NGOs in South Asia, towards peace, human rights, democracy, secularism, and pluralism;
- strengthen networking and co-operation for advocacy and action for sustainable development, gender equality and peace in South Asia; and
- facilitate ongoing sharing and mutual strengthening, and plan joint activities at the national and South Asian level.

## **Most important are human beings and human values**

Few development organizations seem to be doing the thinking, soul searching and re-designing required.

We, the organizers of these courses, believe that without focusing on the promotion and cultivation of human values such as caring, sharing, nurturing and meaningful living, a successful course is not possible. These values need to be practiced not only within families, but in ALL institutions. Today, peace and promotion of diversity are not luxuries or options but necessities.

Based on this belief, the leitmotif of this course was development of human capabilities and nurturing human values.

The constant refrain from Kamla was that along with women's empowerment, we need empowerment of human values. "Changing the sex of the cancer cells won't help", she said, "We have to fight cancer". Women not only have to enter the mainstream but transform it, make it fair, just, democratic and peaceful. "It is not enough that women become leaders. Women have to transform the whole notion of leadership and power. We need collective leadership", Kamla said. To inspire her participants, Kamla often started her sessions by narrating stories of sharing, cooperation, honesty and harmony with nature.



## Inspiring location and good arrangements

The location of the course was the picturesque and secluded Dhulikhel Lodge Resort, 32 kilometers outside Kathmandu. Most participants thought it was heavenly and enticing; it had a sweeping view of green hills and small Tamang settlements.

The natural beauty and silence of the place inspired us all. There were no distractions other than the beauty of the surroundings! Our proximity to nature provided us a sense of rooted-ness and harmony. A participant from Nepal commented, "The sight of Tamang women carrying fodder to feed livestock or carrying water are reminders that we need to break free from patriarchy. It also made us realize where we had to head after the month-long Sangat course."

Meeting the different needs of about 42 women for one month looked smooth and effortless. We admire Shtrii Shakti and Dhulikhel Lodge teams for their hard work.

## The participants

These courses are still exclusively for women so that they can think, speak and act freely, without any inhibitions. We believe this space for women is necessary in South Asia. Sangat also realizes that men need to be included in such courses. However, we feel that women's strength, solidarity and perspectives need to be urgently worked



upon through these intensive courses. Therefore, for the time being, Sangat chooses to concentrate on building the capacities of women to enable them to lead the struggle for gender equality, peace etc.

A careful selection of participants is a pre-requisite for the success of these courses. Sangat selects participants with the help of partner NGOs and individuals who know the nature and significance of these courses. The criteria for selection are:

- affiliation with and commitment to work and struggles for women's empowerment, peace, justice, human rights, and sustainable development;
- minimum three years of work experience; and
- good working knowledge of English.

The original idea was to take a maximum of 30 par-



ticipants. However, Sangat was inundated with requests and thus accepted 39 full-time participants, along with five participants as-observers for some sessions.

The 2009 batch was really good. Participants represented seven countries, namely Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Burma, India, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka. They represented some of the best local, national, and international NGOs working in South Asia. Participants were selected in a manner so that they represented different regions, religions, ethnic groups and castes. There were women from minority communities and excluded groups from each country. This diversity enriched the course as well as provided an opportunity to discuss issues related to identity politics, communalism etc.

The vocational background of the participants was as varied as their experience. There were activists, trainers, researchers, university teachers, planners, development workers and programme managers. The diversity in educational background, work experience, nature of work made for beneficial sharing and mutual learning.

Several participating NGOs organize campaigns and movements against violence against women, unjust globalization, poverty, destruction of biodiversity etc. Many work for the rights of Dalits, religious and ethnic minorities and Adivasis.

All the organizations represented at the course realized the need for conceptual clarity on gender issues and to make their programmes gender-transformative. The

keenness and commitment of these NGOs in sending their senior staff to the course was amply demonstrated by the fact that several of them raised funds for their travel and stay.

The atmosphere was informal, friendly and joyous. Participants said they felt accepted, reaffirmed and empowered. Most of them stated that since strong women like them often do not get reaffirmation and appreciation they felt overwhelmed when they received it. Some participants said that they did not want the course to end!

Sabrina, a young nun from India, felt the course was meant for her. For Tharanga, a participant from Sri Lanka, this year was her third and successful attempt to participate in the Sangat course. Lalithamma from Andhra Pradesh, India, impressed everyone with her devotion for the course—she joined a month-long English speaking course before Sangat's course so as to communicate in English. Two student leaders from Nepal – Radhika and Sunita – also participated, while Srijana from Shtrii Shakti, a participant from the 13th Sangat course, was the backbone of all logistical preparations.

## The resource team

Sangat's team of resource persons comprises some of the finest feminists in South Asia:

- **Kamla Bhasin**, the Advisor of Sangat, was present for the first 17 days during which she handled



most sessions on feminism, patriarchy, masculinity, gender, VAW, sustainable development and yoga. Kamla has written extensively on issues related to gender, participatory development, peace etc.

- **Abha Bhaiya**, a feminist gender trainer and activist, one of the founders of Jagori Women's Resource and Training Centre and Kartini, was present for the last 13 days during which she conducted sessions on body politics, sexuality, health and reproductive rights, VAW, media and feminist training methodologies.

Other experienced and committed resource persons conducted sessions for one to three days each. They were:

- **Sapna Pradhan Malla**, a senior lawyer working on issues of human rights and violence against women through the Forum for Women, Law and Development in Nepal;
- **Rukmini Rao**, a feminist activist and scholar who works both at the grassroots and policy levels in India. She has worked with Saheli, Deccan Development Society, Centre for World Solidarity and is now actively involved with Gramya, an organisation working with the Dalit community in India;
- **Lata Mani**, a feminist historian and cultural critic, who writes on feminist, cultural and postcolonial

studies, is the author of *Contentious Traditions: The Debate on Sati in Colonial India*; *Interleaves: Ruminations on Illness and Spiritual Life*; and most recently *Sacred secular: Contemplative Cultural Critique*;

- **Shanta Laxmi Shrestha**, a development planner, with many years of experience at the grass roots level in Nepal;
- **Binda Pande, Rachna Khadka** and **Rama Alemagar**, all trade union and political activists working at the grass roots and national level;
- **Lubna Marium**, a well-known classical dancer and dance teacher in Bangladesh who runs a Dhaka-based cultural organization and a telephone helpline for drug addicts and their families;
- **Deepa Dhanraj**, a noted feminist film-maker from India, whose films explore and reveal the deeply entrenched gender inequalities in society; and
- **Ambreen Ahmed**, a renowned child psychiatrist from Pakistan with extensive work on child sexual abuse, women's mental health and women's empowerment.

All resource persons had strong rights-based, pro-people, ecological and feminist perspective. They looked at issues in a holistic manner. All of them have been involved with organizations and movements for social change and committed to creating a peaceful, just and



sustainable South Asia. This was an opportunity for an interface and a dialogue between two generations of development activists and feminists. Many resource persons shared their life stories; most of these were like oral histories of the women's and NGO movements in India, Sri Lanka, Pakistan and Nepal. Participants found these life stories extremely educative and inspirational.

All resource persons have committed to give time to such learning processes in the future. The atmosphere of the course and the amazing appetite of participants for new learning inspired them.

## Sharing rooms, cultural practices and concerns

For most participants, this was their first encounter with South Asians. In order to maximize personal and



professional sharing across borders, it was mandatory for women from the same country to not stay together. Rooms and room partners were changed every week so that close sharing could take place between as many participants as possible.

During personal sharing (both in and outside the sessions), participants learnt about each other's physical and emotional problems, and even tried to help. Many participants were ready to massage those in need. Many cried listening to stories of personal losses, oppression or painful conflicts in personal relationships. Participants brought different talents which enriched and helped the group. Some sang beautifully and others danced really well.

## Welcome with colourful setting, flowers, sweets and hugs

In the inaugural session, Kamla and the Shtrii Shakti team welcomed each participant with a colourful dupatta, Kaju barfi (a traditional cashewnut-based sweet)

### Sumshot Khullar, India:

I have never received such a loving and warm welcome ever in my life. One comes across formal welcomes and speeches but the warmth of the embrace that each one of us received will always stay with me.



and a big hug. The bright orange and yellow Sangat jute bags (containing reading material and stationery) added to the colour of the hall where all participants sat on the floor.

## Lighting candles of knowledge, friendship and peace

In her welcome address, Kamla stated that the most important reason for doing these courses was developing understanding, friendship and cooperation across borders in South Asia—“Through this month-long togetherness, we try to develop a South Asian consciousness and a South Asian community of concerned and committed activists and citizens. In addition to

developing a feminist and pro-people perspective among mid-level women activists/development workers, these courses create and strengthen cooperation and networking”.

Kamla invited everyone to contribute as much as she could and take as much as needed. She handed over the responsibility of the success of the course to all the participants, saying, “The tiny Sangat team has worked for about six months to plan and put this course together. Now you will take it forward. Now the success depends on your seriousness and commitment to learn, contribute, make friends and to love.”

Kamla made it clear that the group will be working for long hours. “The day will begin with yoga at 0630 hours and go on till 2200 hours on most days. Evenings





will be devoted to country presentations, films and more song and dance. I say “more” because singing and dancing will take place also during all tea breaks. ”

After welcoming the participants, she lit a candle as a symbol of knowledge that dispels darkness, as a sign of love that dispels hatred, and peace that dispels violence and conflict. Then with her candle, she lit the candle of the participant sitting next to her who introduced herself with a message to the group and let the candle of the next participants. The participants were asked to write their messages on cards and put them up on a board.

Some of the messages written by participants are:

- For creating peace, we need to find peace within ourselves
- An empowered woman brings big change in the family and society

- Respect others to get respect
- Every one pays the price of violence against women
- PEACE is the only way forward
- Women’s rights are human rights and we will fight for them. Long live women’s movement
- We believe in solidarity and peace
- Happy homes are violence free
- I want to see smiles on every woman’s face
- Give love and get love

## **Observers welcome**

Like in earlier courses, some young women were encouraged to attend the course as observers. This was their opportunity to learn and meet women from different countries. Several women working with local NGOs attended a few sessions.



# The process and methodology of the course

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## The process of learning

It is almost an impossible task to describe the proceedings of the course or capture the coming together of such a large group of women with varied strengths and histories. Yet, the following is an attempt to explain its essence.

Innumerable techniques were used to transcend the distances between the participants. They sang together in each other's language, danced, meditated and practiced yoga. There was a lot of laughter and warmth, as much as there was shared pain of being women in oppressive cultures. The yoga sessions helped concentrate better and experience the unity between body and mind. The evening walks and games in the open air provided fun and broke the monotony of being in a classroom. Similarly, living and learning together minimized the distinction between resource persons and learners. Sitting on the floor in a circle where each one could make eye contact with the other was an attempt to minimize hierarchies and to encourage frank and informal discussions. The process of self-analysis and awareness helped the group identify patriarchal structures of domination and subordination

in their own lives and also explore ways to challenge and transcend these.

The theme of feminism was not limited to a single session but ran through the course like a thread. By sharing each other's lives and analyzing how various identities were constructed, the group was able to locate itself in a complex fabric made up of structures and systems of domination, interwoven with sites of struggle and resistance. The creativity of each individual was encouraged; every participant got the opportunity to learn new skills and share strengths.

## Learning through song and dance

The long hours of structured work were interspersed with music and dance. The morning and afternoon sessions usually started with songs in different languages, sung by different participants. The themes of many of these songs were relevant issues such as dowry, wife beating, women's education, environment, human rights and communal harmony.

During discussions on training methodology, the group learnt that singing is an important part of the culture of South Asia. In countries with a strong oral





tradition, songs are a very potent means of communication. Many groups have been using the medium of songs to initiate discussions, raise awareness, to energize and most of all to create solidarity. In some areas, women and men farmers can still be heard singing while planting rice or harvesting crops. It is through songs that many NGOs are spreading the message of justice, peace, organic agriculture, harmony with nature etc. Some new songs were learnt by everyone in the group. Similarly, some women who had never danced earlier learnt new dance steps.

The use of posters and films in the course complimented lectures and discussions. Learning became

interesting with the use of multimedia forms of communication. On the first day itself, participants put up posters, charts and wall hangings which they had brought along from their organizations.

The two tea breaks every day functioned as song and dance breaks too. While tea and snacks provided physical energy, music and dance gave the participants mental and spiritual energy.

*Andheriya Rattiya*, a song from Jharkhand and the popular *Resham Phiriri* from Nepal, became the group's anthem songs. These were sung between sessions, on free days, in the bus and later, at the time of departure at the Kathmandu international airport, with tears streaming down our faces. Lubna was grace personified and gave us an impromptu dance performance that was highly appreciated by the participants.

Daily yoga classes lasted for a full-hour starting from 6.30 A.M. While the initial days were a riot of body aches, it meant a steady progress to more yogic positions. Abha and Kamla inspired the participants to practice yoga daily while Deepa's intense yoga sessions led to more groans.

After the course, Indika from Sri Lanka wrote, "I have been practicing Yoga everyday since my body feels lethargic without it. The bee sound that I produce during breathing exercises makes my cat run under the bed!"

Kamla not only roused participants by leading them on with songs about peace, friendship and womanhood but also created a new song that was a clarion call for the entire group. This song marked the end of a dry spell for Kamla that she had experienced after a personal tragedy. Set to the tune of the popular Nepali folk song (Resham Phiriri), Kamla's song talked about life's journey. It was her tribute to the spirit and energy that the participants gave her:

*Chalte Jaayenge*

*Chalte jaayenge, badhte jaayenge  
Har pal seekhain, har pal badlain  
Chalet jaayenge...*

*Chalna hee jeevan, bahna hee jeevan  
Jeevan hai parivartan  
Har dam thirkain, har dam nikhrain  
Har dam hongay hum nutan  
Chalte jaayenge...*

*Kaanon se sunte, aankhon se sunte  
Sunte hain hum dil se  
Jin ko bhi milte, pyaar se milte  
Jeete hain hum mil ke  
Chalte jayeenge...*

*Pustak se seekhain, Quدرات se seekhain  
See khain hum jeevan se  
Badon se seekhain, chhoton se seekhain  
Seekhain hum har jan se  
Chalte jaayenge....*

Taking a cue from Kamla, a group of participants led by Sabrina got together two days before the course was over and composed a song in Kamla's honour. The lyrics follow:

She'll be coming round South Asia  
When she comes  
She'll be bringing love and inspiration  
When she comes  
She'll be singing feminist songs  
When she comes

Freedom from patriarchy – Azadi  
Freedom from exploitation – Azadi  
Freedom from Sexploitation  
Freedom from Militarization  
Freedom from Globalization – Azadi  
Breaking the boundaries of South Asia  
Here we come  
Being cracks in political walls  
Here we come  
Bringing secularism, bringing spiritualism  
Bringing pluralism and feminism  
Here we come

Goodbye to TINA syndrome  
From all of us  
New changes are possible  
Look at us  
Now we have all become inclusive  
Let us share our dreams with pleasure  
To bring peace and harmony in South Asia



## Many other ways to learn

Other teaching methods used during the course were small group discussions, role plays, debates, and skits. These exercises enhanced the creativity of the participants, and enriched the quality of discussions. Mornings started with critical reflection and reviews about the proceedings of the previous day. This helped resource persons and the group to recall and review.

The personal life of each participant, the collective life of the group and those of the visiting resource persons got intricately woven into a beautiful tapestry as processes unfolded. Personal introductions, group presentations, reflections and vignettes of personal lives helped the process. The personal testimony of resource persons was very inspiring as many of them had been in the women's movement and involved with research and women's studies for over two decades.



# The contents of the course

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**T**here were three main content areas of the course. The following pages provide some glimpses into what was shared and discussed.

## **A. Getting to know ourselves and each other**

Getting to know oneself and each other was an important aspect and objective of the course. Through various exercises, the group learnt about multiple identities. The socio-gramming exercise done on the first day surfaced different identities. In addition to having different nationalities, participants belonged to different religions, ethnic and language groups. This exercise highlighted cross-country connections and historical links, and strengthened the desire to build stronger bridges of peace and cooperation across countries.

The room sharing arrangements and seating arrangements ensured that participants spend a good deal of time with one another. This enabled participants to get to know each other at a personal level.

## **The personal is political**

As is always the case in these courses, participants got a glimpse of each other's personal lives and journeys.

This was done with the feminist belief that the personal and professional can hardly be separated in the lives of women. To understand gender inequalities in South Asia, the group started by critically looking at their own lives and seeing connections with lives of other women we seek to empower. The realities of one's own life make theoretical learning about gender issues more rooted, meaningful and clear. It transcends cognitive learning and makes it a part of life's experiences.

One of the exercises the participants did in five small groups was to answer three simple questions:

- When did I realize I was a girl/woman?;
- What was my most painful experience as a girl/woman?; and
- Have I ever revolted against or opposed any patriarchal norms?

These questions were discussed with incredible honesty. Some women poured their hearts out as if they were just waiting for the lid to be lifted. While narrating their stories, many could not help crying. When the pain was excessive, others held them and even cried with them. There were many moments during this sharing when the entire group sat in total silence with wet eyes. Most



were overwhelmed by the excessive violence around, the rejection and humiliation experienced as girls/women and also by the commonality of experiences.

The experiences that were shared in the group showed that most women had traveled a very difficult path to reach where they had. The workings of patriarchy were evident in most stories. Patriarchy was by no means a thing of the past. Each one was still negotiating, fighting or living with one or the other manifestations of patriarchy.

Many participants said this was the first time they had shared their experiences. While the process of sharing was painful, they had a sense of release and relief. This kind of sharing made the participants feel much closer, as if collective tears had been washed away.

## **My most painful experience as a woman**

Sharing on the subject showed that almost all participants had experienced rejection, humiliation and constraints as women. Some experiences were painful, others shocking. Sexual abuse was experienced by many. Most could not talk about this to anyone which made coping more difficult. The few who confided in their mothers were told not to talk or think about it. For others, it was painful when they decided to marry a partner of their choice. They were bewildered by hostility expressed towards them.

Another participant experienced trauma when she saw her father beat her mother.

For many others, there were painful experiences related to their work and work place. Two participants narrated that their families turned hostile when they decided to take up a job. Some were made to feel guilty about going out to work.

## **Victims resist, become survivors**

Everyone in the course was a fighter and a survivor. Each of the participants had fought, resisted, revolted and opposed some ideas, people or tradition. The workings of patriarchy were evident in most stories. Each one was still negotiating, fighting or living with one or the other manifestation of patriarchy. The need to have a holistic perspective and approach in gender courses was clear to all. It was also evident that women's activism, sensitivity and commitment to gender issues is connected to their personal experiences.

## **B. Country presentations**

Learning about each other's country and organization was another important part of the course.

The country presentations were a beautiful mix of stories, an overview of the country, its socio-political profile, the situation of women, the key development issues being addressed in the country and organizational

profiles and activities of each NGO represented at the course. This session helped build a regional profile of South Asia.

The overwhelming influence of fundamentalists and power brokers, the increasing violations of women's rights and violence against women, the degrading ecological zones, politics of identity, the issues of governance, the increasing gap between the rich and poor, the relationships between various development actors were running themes. The statistics presented by each country further proved the inferior position of women.

Participants had worked hard for their country presentations. They prepared posters, songs, little skits and dances to showcase their country's cultural diversity, social and political movements and history.

The story of each organization was one of struggle, determination and courage. Whether it was a health programme, a water and sanitation one, policy research or a feminist resource centre, the seeds of alternative development were being tested and implemented in significant ways. The country presentations helped the group see links between the historical, geographical, ecological, economic and political lives of neighbouring countries.

They also presented data and details about major features of each country, development and gender issues, policy interventions for women's empowerment and so on. The participants got to know many different

organizations and saw mirror images in each other's work. They could experience the pain of their neighbours through stories of denial, exclusion and subjugation of women and girls. They raised questions about how they could turn the processes around and strengthen each other's work.

Many organizations were evolving strategies to address the politics of hate. For many participants, these presentations were their first exposures to other countries. They gained new information about how to work on issues of agriculture, education, health, advocacy and so on.

## **C. Main issues discussed**

The process of learning, unlearning, questioning, wondering, discovering were some of the most significant aspects of the course. There was constant overlapping between concepts, personal lives and women's movement. This report can provide just a glimpse of some of the presentations that were made and discussions that followed.

### *Gender and patriarchy*

The course started with personal experiences and the discussions on gender and patriarchy were built on these. While explaining these two concepts, Kamla introduced and explained a whole lot of terms such as



gender inequality, gender hierarchy, gender asymmetry, gender division of labour, biological reproduction, social reproduction and so on. She also introduced the concept of power and followed it with a discussion. The participants were divided in small groups to spot examples of patriarchy and power in their personal, social and professional lives.

### *Development and sustainable development*

This focussed on post-independence development planning and policies in South Asia and their impact on the income of poor sections and women. Different approaches to women's development like WID, WAD and GAD were introduced. A critique of the present paradigm of development from the perspective of the income poor and gender was presented. This was followed by presentations and discussions on sustainable livelihood and sustainable agriculture. The main principles and values of sustainability were discussed at length. Two field visits were organized to see some of these principles being put to practice.

Presentations and discussions on natural resource management and gender followed. Successful examples of women's participation in natural resource management, women's indigenous knowledge, appropriate technology, case studies of projects which marginalize women further were discussed in these sessions. Indicators for measuring the success of rural development

and natural resource management projects were also developed.

### *Women's movements and feminisms*

The session comprised detailed discussions on the present state of women's movements in different countries, the issues they were grappling with, the achievements and challenges of these movements and so on. The need for NGOs to link up with these movements was emphasized.

Participants were given a deep understanding of feminisms, their processes of producing meaning, subverting representations of gender, and recreating new representations of gender, womanhood, identity and the collective self. The presentation and the discussions focused on the following:

- Is feminism a western concept and hence irrelevant in South Asia?;
- Can men be feminists?;
- Do feminists break families?;
- Feminism cuts across all issues—peace, ecology, religion etc. and finds alliances with all forms of marginalized groups;
- Feminism is a perspective and all issues are women's issues;
- The feminist slogan "Personal is the political";



- Notions of sameness and equality; and
- Different kinds of feminisms—radical, Marxist, socialist, liberal, Gandhian etc.

### *Globalization and sustainable development*

Abha Bhaiya and Rukmini Rao initiated discussions on different aspects of globalization and sustainable development. They described the processes of globalization, development and their critiques as well as the impact of development on women.

The current global development pattern and hierarchies it created (North versus South, developed versus underdeveloped, majority versus minority) were discussed. Factors such as specialization and compartmentalization of knowledge, creation of conflict and instability were also talked about in detail.

As an exercise, participants were divided into groups and asked to develop alternative development paradigms with themes such as sustainable and regenerative use of resources, innovative methods of sustainable agriculture (comprising both new and old methodologies and techniques), demilitarization, celebrating and preserving diversity in nature and so on.

### *Gender and law*

Sapna Pradhan-Malla and Abha Bhaiya helped develop a critical understanding of law and justice in different

countries of South Asia. Participants analysed how law impacts women. Women's status in the family and their economic position in the society are determined to a large extent by law. At the same time, law is one of the most powerful tools to provide justice to women and establish their rights. Ideology and sources of law was yet another theme studied. Participants were introduced to various aspects of law such as religion, culture/customs, international law and conventions, colonial laws, parliamentary laws, economic laws and so on. Law is also a powerful mechanism used by strong federal states to control dissent.

### *Religion, secularism and spirituality*

This was a new theme introduced in Sangat's month long course. The sessions were facilitated by Dr. Lata Mani, a historian and cultural critic who welcomed participants to each session by playing soulful music from different major religious traditions of the world. She introduced the concept of inter-connectedness or the divine createdness of all living things. She explained it as the triad of Self–other–divinity.

Participants were also introduced to the concept of the collective wisdom of the mind, heart and body: I am not my mind; I am not my heart; I am not my body; I am a deeper consciousness. Lata stated that all religious traditions have an innate suspicion of the body which in turn distorts the way we perceive reality.

Against a background of rising religious fundamentalism in South Asia and the world over, Lata called upon the participants to consider, reconsider and rethink their understanding of religion and secularism. The open and honest conversations that followed among the participants was a challenging and fruitful experience. They confronted their own biases and prejudices.

The film *Khuda Key Liye* was screened. It depicted how religion fundamentalism, intolerance and wrong interpretations can damage people and communities; it also revealed the militant nature of governments.

## Self awareness and self growth

The two-day session was conducted by Dr. Ambreen Ahmed. It focused on the self and creating greater awareness about communication and interaction. The sessions consisted of group and individual work where participants were given the space to delve deep into their inner selves and have a better understanding of their own strengths and weaknesses. The topics discussed were:

- Fear of knowing yourself;
- Lack of self confidence;
- Facing your own weaknesses;
- Past experiences—guilt;
- Over-confidence; and
- Measuring ourselves against others

Participants were also introduced to concepts such as the Johari Window, power and so on. At the end of the session, they obtained a more rational understanding of their own self.

## Sex and sexuality

Facilitated by Deepa Dhanraj and Abha Bhaiya, the sessions began with basic concepts of sex and sexuality. Participants were encouraged to know their bodies in more intimate ways. Relevant to the discussion, female reproductive parts were drawn and an open discussion was encouraged. The menstrual cycle, its relation to ovulation, process of fertilization with male sperm, and so on were explained.

Myths and effects related to masturbation, sexual intercourse and orgasm were also discussed. During the discussion it was found that many misconceptions, biased judgments and derogatory terms were ascribed to all these processes by patriarchal cultures. A group discussion was held on how sex work should be viewed. The participants were introduced to the history of laws relating to sexuality in South Asia. A documentary film titled *Tales of Night Fairies* was screened. The film captures the struggles of sex workers from Sonagachi, West Bengal, India.

Sessions on some difficult issues such as identity politics, religious fundamentalism, ethnic conflict and violence, militarization and nuclearization proved to be



both insightful and disturbing. These showed their direct impact on women, the income poor and on development in general.

Women's role in governance, women and media, advocacy and lobbying on strategies for women's empowerment and organizational development were the other issues on which presentations were made by resource persons.

Though initially, some participants imagined one month as a long time to stay away from families, but as days passed, everyone realized it was hardly enough time to learn everything there was to learn about the subject. To watch all the films, read all the literature that had been circulated and have deep discussions, one month seemed too short.

## **Getting creative with learning**

### **Banners and posters**

One of the most creative expressions of Sangat's work in South Asia and its contribution to alternative forms of communication has been the production of well-designed, bright and colourful banners on issues of gender, human rights, peace, friendship, globalization, diversity, pluralism and sustainable livelihoods. These banners are created especially to add colour and provide richness to the courses.

At this course, the entire resort was decorated with

cheerful banners with strong feminist messages. The aim was not just to use the medium of lectures, readings and discussions but also use other creative spaces to foster understanding and clarity on concepts. These banners created an atmosphere of solidarity and commitment for issues such as peace, human rights, justice and women's empowerment. In fact, many participants took photographs of these banners and translated them into their local languages. The banners received the attention of hundreds of visitors at the Dhulikhel Resort.

Some of the banners displayed were:

- Men of Quality are not Afraid of Equality;
- Looking at the World Through Women's Eyes;
- No More Silence on Domestic Violence;
- Real Men Do Not Rape;
- Families Need Partners, Not Lords And Masters;
- We Want Open Skies of Friendship Not Walls of Hatred;
- War Has No Future, Peace Is The Future;
- Human Rights for All;
- We Need The Movement of Men Towards Family Kitchens;
- Women's Body and Mind Are Sacred. No One has the Right to Violate Them;
- South Asians for Human Rights;



- Those Who Love Life Stand for Peace;
- Mother Earth Has Enough for Everyone's Need But Not for Everyone's Greed;
- We Respect Men Who Respect Women;
- South Asian Feminists Unlimited;
- Democracy Without Women is No Democracy; and
- We Want Peace in South Asia, Not Pieces of South Asia.

## Films

To make discussions more lively and meaningful, films were shown throughout the course. Sadly, there was not enough time to do justice to the many films that participants had brought along.

The films were thought provoking and moved the group to explore themes deeply. What could never be captured as effectively through a lecture was sometimes presented forcefully through films.

Some films triggered discussions. Among all others, "*America America*" – an anti-war song – received great applause. Produced by K. P. Sasi, the song is choreographed on the famous Sinhala tune "Surangini". Many participants requested for copies of this video for use in their countries.

The films shown during the course:

- America America
- When women unite
- Something like a war
- Antonia's line
- Tale of the night fairies
- Who will speak of men
- Manju Ben, truck driver
- Pukaar
- Redefining peace, women lead the way
- Khamosh paani
- Father, son and the holy war
- Dor
- Kabir
- Nasreen O Nasreen
- Through the looking glass
- Fire
- Bhumika
- Gender unpack
- Fight for democracy.

## Participants' day out

To give participants a break from the sessions, they were treated to a free day every week. They could experience Nepalese culture, customs, daily life, local cuisine and shopping excursions.

The group visited the two royal cities of Kathmandu valley—Bhaktapur (City of Devotees) and Patan. Local participants from Nepal took on the role of tour guides. Visits were also organized to Pashupatinath, one of the largest Hindu temples in the world. Participants also visited Boudhanath, one of the oldest and largest Buddhist temples in the world and the Kathmandu Durbar Square.

The group also visited non-government organizations and met their staff and beneficiaries. The first visit was to Blue Diamond, an NGO that works with lesbians, gays, bi-sexuals and trans-genders. For many participants, it was their first encounter with people with alternate sexual identities. The group also visited Shanthi Sewa Griha in Pashupathinath, a centre for people suffering from leprosy and the disabled. This NGO runs a hospital and clinic that provides free medicine to some of the poorest people in the area.



## Sangat's 25th year celebrations!

The year 2009 marked the **25th year of Sangat's Gender Equality, Justice, Peace and Sustainable Livelihood** course and the 10th year of **Shtrii Shakti's gender trainings in Nepal**. The occasion was celebrated on 30 October, 2009 with nearly 200 people, including all the South Asian participants of the course.

The program started with a felicitation ceremony where resource persons such as Kamla Bhasin, Runu Chakravorty, Deepak Tamang, Sukhmaya Bohora, and Himmat Singh Lekali were honoured for their contribution to capacity-building courses by Indira Shrestha, Chief Executive of Shtrii Shakti. Kamla Bhasin launched the Gender Master Trainer's Directory on the occasion.

The highlight of the evening was a performance by all 39 participants. They sang the song "*Chalte jaayenge*" (composed by Kamla Bhasin during the course) and danced on a folk song from Jharkhand.



# Evaluation, reflections and follow-up

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**R**evue and evaluation of the month-long learning process was an ongoing, in-built process. The evaluation was done in three different ways. The day started with a daily reflection where participants were asked to evaluate the previous day's sessions.

After the first fortnight, a mid-term evaluation was done where participants were asked to write down their feelings and reflections about the course. The feedback helped resource persons on content and methodology of their sessions. It also surfaced specific needs of the group and clarified some issues.

In addition, participants were asked to do a detailed written evaluation on the last day. Sets of questions were given to them on content areas, methodology, design and duration, resource persons, administrative support and logistics, personal growth, resource materials and so on. The participants were also asked to write about how they planned to use the learning in their professional and personal lives.

While it is impossible to share the entire evaluation process, some of its highlights are presented in the section that follows.

## Reflections

Every morning began with an inspiring song. This was followed by reflections of participants on the previous day. Every participant was encouraged to speak in this session.

After two weeks of the course, participants were asked to write down their reflections about the course. Each and every participant expressed her gratitude to the people responsible for running the course. Many were moved by Kamla Bhasin who exuded infectious radiance and warmth. Yoga was a big hit with everyone who woke up early in the morning! Similarly, the venue of the course was loved by all.

Although a lot of participants work on gender issues, for most this was the first time that they understood it from a feminist perspective. It was thus an exploration for them, both personally as well as professionally. At the personal front, while some reported that they were no longer confused about calling themselves feminists, there were others who were excited to discover their new selves. Others did

not feel guilty or ashamed to be known as feminists. At the professional front, they gathered new energy and found direction for their work. For many, it infused their workplace roles with new passion; they saw themselves as change agents. Many reported feeling stronger.

The participants were especially inspired by all the resource persons. The bonds and feeling of sisterhood cemented this diverse group of women together. They discovered myriad ways in which they were similar despite their differences. Here are some responses in the participant's own words:

*I learnt my silence could be political. Sway, Myanmar*

*The session on sex and sexuality sensitized me to feel the pain and stigma experienced by marginalized groups. Jamila, Afghanistan*

*"I have to confess that I am too bad in this emotional business. I don't usually express my feelings to others but the one-month Sangat experience has changed me a lot. I learnt from Dr. Ambreen that crying is not a crime. Dr. Lata Mani said that the faculties of the mind, body and heart can work together. I am stronger now in a different way. Earlier I thought that as feminists we have to be aggressive to show we are strong. Now I know it is not right. I always remember Kamla's words—"watch your thoughts". Tharanga Manori Gunasinghe, Sri Lanka*

*"To bring a group of 39 women from diverse backgrounds, different age groups with different levels of understanding of gender and feminism, some conservative, others liberal can be a nightmare. Add to this a good number who were challenged in English and the task becomes even more daunting. During the first few days, participants were apprehensive and uncertain. The lighting of the lamps set the tone for the rest of the course. The collective activities of meditation, yoga, singing and dancing together, sharing rooms with different partners every week, and sharing intimate experiences of joy and pain went a long way in forging new bonds of love and friendship.*

*The course was a continuous process of self discovery, culminating in the two-day concentrated sessions on self awareness and analysis. Not only did we discover how the world was constructed to serve the interests*



*of a few ,but also how our personal lives and identities were shaped by patriarchal structures and systems of domination through ideologies that were sanctified by faith and religious doctrines.” Rubina Khilji, Pakistan*

*“This report almost never happened. Thanks to Mona Sherpa and her sudden insight three days before the course ended that we should have a report on the basis of notes taken by participants. Kamla in her infinite wisdom encouraged us to work together as a team. Indika (Sri Lanka) was prompt in her contribution. Rubina (Pakistan) suffered from severe back pain but dictated her notes to a friend and then mailed them. Mona (Nepal) was battling bronchitis yet did her bit. I would like to specially acknowledge Tharanga (Sri Lanka) for her never-ending patience with me. To everyone in the committee: Sabrina, Prachi, Anisha—a big thank you.*

*Kamla remains the rock behind this report. Many thanks for giving me this wonderful opportunity of working for Sangat.*

*The course was life changing in many ways. I come from conflict-torn Manipur in India. I have overcome emotional abuse and physical violence, and coped with divorce and its stigma. The course was the final frontier I had to cross to be able to heal.*

*It has been an emotional and spiritual journey that will continue in my life now. I felt love, affinity and acceptance from friends and for the first time I could come to terms with all the hurt, anger, guilt and unresolved tears over my father’s long illness and later, his passing away. More power to future courses!*  
Chitra Ahanthem, India

*“I was returning to the month-long Sangat course after almost ten years. Although I was really looking forward to seeing old friends, I also had some questions and concerns in my mind. Would I still find the same magic and feel the same thrill and love? The enthusiasm of 39 women made my doubts vanish.*

*During my sessions on self-awareness, participants explored the importance of honest sharing, taking risks in relationships, and giving and receiving feedback. The participants agreed on the importance of watching out for their conscious but much more often subconscious biases. Dr. Ambreen Ahmed, Pakistan*

*"The Sangat course was a very engaging and rewarding experience for me. I knew from the moment I arrived that I was in a special place. The banners proclaiming the hopes for peace and justice festooning the resort made it evident that I would be participating in something dharmic (that is to say grounded in loving, ethical awareness). Everything that I observed and experienced during my time there strongly reaffirmed this sense.*

*The work that all instructors had done to create an open, inclusive and dynamic space of critical inquiry paved the way for me to raise tough questions about feminism's relationship to secularism, religion and faith. The generosity of the underlying vision of the course was reflected in the way participants responded to the issues and to each other. I could not have hoped for a better context in which to try to push the debate in this contentious arena past the current impasse.*

*Last but not least, I was touched by the attention to detail Kamla, Srijana and others manifested to ensure the comfort of all participants. Thank you, again." Lata Mani, India*

*Though I am away from you but not really...your faces, voices, doubts and clarity swim around me... I continue to share and feel close to you. I know you have had a wonderful time with Ambreen, Lata Mani and of course with Kamla, the star.*

*This is to wish you the very best, to tell you that we have a BIG task of carrying forward our struggle for a better tomorrow." Abha Bhaiya, India*

*"The coordinator of Sangat and I start planning these courses about six months before the course begins. We invest a lot of time in selecting and booking an appropriate venue, in informing people and organizations in South Asia and Burma and seeking nominations for the course. We identify, contact and confirm effective and committed resource persons. We select reading materials and films. After the nominations come in, we select participants and start corresponding with them. Then we make travel arrangements for the participants and resource persons.*

*Each year we get more nominations/applications than the last time. I suppose each year more people/orga-*

nizations hear about the course and its usefulness. For this fourteenth course, during which we celebrated 25 years of these courses, we received over 60 applications and most of them were very good. It is never a good feeling when we have to say no to applicants. We try not to accept more than 30 participants, but this year we took as many as 39 participants—30 per cent more than we planned/budgeted for. The only reason was to reach out to as many people/organizations as we can, without lessening the effectiveness of the course.

Although we have found the participants of every course very good, committed and cooperative, I am always anxious before the arrival of the participants. Just one or two difficult, inflexible, uncooperative or demanding participants can make things difficult. Like always, this time too, all participants were very good, cooperative, loving and keen learners. The rather large group jelled well. In response to our warm welcome, informality and openness, the participants were joyful, and keen to learn, share and help. No one came more than 2-3 minutes late for any session in the 30 days. All participated actively except those who were not fluent in English. (Women who cannot understand or speak English should not attend this course; they are better suited for our vernacular language courses) They asked perceptive questions, shared their views and appreciated what they were learning.

Once the participants got to know each other and the resource persons, I could sense tremendous warmth and affection. I felt a great sense of well being. At times I was euphoric with a strong feeling of love and connection. On the third morning of the course, a nice song was born. It was based on the tune of Nepali folk song Mona (from Nepal) had taught us. I was delighted and so were the participants. I felt a deep sense of satisfaction when the participants appreciated me through their body language and in the written evaluation.

I gave 18 days to the course and was in the hall every morning at 0625 hours either to learn body work and yoga from Lubna and Deepa or to teach yoga. I was happy to see that at least 60 percent of participants came for yoga every day. Two or three participants even came a few minutes earlier every day to prepare the hall for yoga. Regular and group yoga gave me the energy to be in the course every day from early



*in the morning till late at night The beautiful venue, with green hills close by and snow clad mountains at some distance, clean and cool air, bright sun shine energized me. I often found myself smiling in gratitude and joy. I was deeply aware of my good luck to have done such creative work all my life. To be in touch with and to bring together such amazing South Asians is both a pleasure and an honour.*

*Like in every course, I learnt a lot from the participants and three other resource persons who were there during my time, namely Lubna (Mariam), Ambreen (Ahmad) and Lata (Mani)*

*I felt gratified when several Nepalese and other friends dropped in at the course and sat with us as observers. I was delighted when I gathered that ISIS-WICCE (from Uganda) and WOREC came to the same venue for a 15-day course on Conflict Resolution and Peace. On one evening, we invited the 38 women participants and resource persons from 14 countries (mainly Africans and Asians) for an interaction. I felt good about the coming together of Sangat and ISIS-WICCE networks.*

*After the course, when I boarded the flight for Delhi, I felt the kind of pain and emptiness which you feel when you leave people you love and care for. I realized I had added another 39 women to my South Asian family. Kamla Bhasin, India*



## Remember

*Remember the sky that you were born under,  
Know each of the star's stories.  
Remember the moon, know who she is.  
Remember the sun's birth at dawn, that is the  
strongest point of time.  
Remember sundown and the giving away to night.  
Remember your birth, how your mother struggled  
to give you form and breath.  
You are evidence of her life, and her mother's and hers.  
Remember your father. He is your life, also.  
Remember the earth whose skin you are;  
red earth, black earth, yellow earth,  
white earth brown earth, we are earth.  
Remember the plants, trees, animal life who  
all have their tribes, their families, their histories, too.  
Talk to them, listen to them. They are alive poems.  
Remember the wind. Remember her voice.  
She knows the origin of this universe.  
Remember that you are all people and that all people are you.  
Remember that you are this universe and that this universe is you.  
Remember that all is in motion, is growing, is you.  
Remember that language comes from this.  
Remember the dance that language is, that life is.  
Remember*

By **Joy Harjo**

From *SHE HAD SOME HORSES*



## Sharing and collaboration after the course

It is indeed difficult to explain the transformation in body, mind and relationships when one spends a month living, sharing, learning and working together with a group of 39 women from different cultures, countries and professions. We are often asked about the tangible outcome and impact of such courses. What has it achieved? We always find it difficult to quantify the love, solidarity and trust which binds the group together and the growth in personal and professional relationships.

The participants of the month-long course create an email group through which they keep in touch, almost on a daily basis. Here are a couple of emails exchanged after the completion of the course:

*"I recognize the efforts you made for all of us...a special month of learning. I hope I can make best use of that first for myself and for others. I'm planning some activities/course on gender understanding/training in the coming months. I shared this very briefly with Kamla when we were in Nepal and with other eastern Indian friends. Hope we can make some future plans."*  
Elina Horo, India

*"I visit the Sangat e-group everyday and read it all. I wrote articles on my Sangat experience; two renowned daily newspapers of Bangladesh – Dainik Azadi and Dainik Purbokone – published them. Yet another paper*

*featured my article. This one month of friendship made the course special. I keep remembering those beautiful days everyday."* Sushmita Chowdhary, Bangladesh

## South Asian Women's Day marked by participants across the region

Kamla shared with the participants the rationale of observing the South Asian Women's Day on November 30. Celebrated since 2002, the day is meant to embed in women a common South Asian identity and to pledge for peace, justice, human rights and democracy in South Asia. Though there was not much time to prepare a coordinated celebration of the day, many marked the day through various activities.

**Nepal:** Action Aid Nepal along with the Mahila Adhikar Manch, a rural women's network, organized a gathering at Mandala Maitighar at the national level. District chapters observed the day by lighting candles, shouting slogans and arranging interactions on the status of South Asian women and their issues.

**Sri Lanka:** Three small groups converged in different villages, lighting candles and affirming the day for women across the region as one of peace.

**India (Darjeeling):** The South Asian Women's Day was observed in Siliguri amidst a bandh called by a political party. The Mary Ward Social Centre started an SMS



campaign—“Let our friendship heal the world! Light a candle between 5:30-6:30 P.M.on 30 November, the South Asian Women’s Day and pray for peace across borders.” Over 300 SMS-es were sent out to friends, elected representatives and government officials. In the evening, a candle lighting ceremony was organized in the Mary Ward Social Centre where the Sangat/PWAG film *“Redefining Peace-Women Lead the Way”* was screened.

**Bangladesh:** In Bangladesh, the day was organized in Chittagong Hill Tracts, Khagrachari district, by a committee comprising three different network organizations: Door Network (Khagrachari district), Chittagong Hill

Tracts Woman Organization Network and Bikoshito Nari Network. The programme was facilitated by Khagrapur Mahila Kalyan Samity (KMKS). About 30-35 women and men participated in the observation, lighting candles and singing. The relevance of the day was also shared with the group.

Many course participants who could not organize large gatherings used popular social networking sites such as Facebook and put out their status updates as: ***We affirm November 30 as South Asian Women’s Day to pledge for peace, justice, human rights and democracy and to celebrate our respective achievements across the region.***

# List of participants

Country	Name of the participant	Organisation
<b>Afghanistan</b>	1. Najia Hajizada	AREU
	2. Jamila Wafa	AREU
<b>Bangladesh</b>	1. Bithika Baroi	CCDB
	2. Ilira Dewan	ALRD
	3. Sabina Yasmin	Naripokkho
	4. Backey Tripura	KMKS
	5. Sushmita Choudhary	YPSA
	6. Shania Sultana	Madaripur Legal Aid Association
<b>India</b>	1. Sabrina Edwards	Mary Ward Social Centre
	2. R. Sunanda Chowdhury	CWS
	3. Elina Horo	Independent researcher
	4. Minati Padhi	Institute for Women's Development
	5. Chitra Ahanthem	Freelance consultant
	6. J. Lalithamma	Asmita
	7. Sumshot Khullar	Freelancer

Country	Name of the participant	Organisation
<b>Nepal</b>	1. Radhika Khatiwada	Nawajyoti Janal Kendra
	2. Muna Manandhar	SEARCH
	3. Dhana Kumari Sunar	National Women's Commission
	4. Samidha Pokharel	Padma Kanya College
	5. Parbati Rawal	SRAM
	6. Sunita	Democratic National Youth Federation
	7. Mona Sherpa	Action Aid
	8. Anisha Kansakar	Shtrii Shakti
	9. Prachi Khetan	Shtrii Shakti
<b>Pakistan</b>	1. Kaneez Fatima	SRSP
	2. Gul Afroz	NRSP
	3. Hafeeza Solangi	SRSO
	4. Uzma Rashid	Khwendo Khor
	5. Shamaila Tanvir	Aurat Foundation
	6. Rubina Khilji	University of Peshawar
	7. Sumbal Ghayur	Rozaan



<b>Country</b>	<b>Name of the participant</b>	<b>Organisation</b>
<b>Sri Lanka</b>	1. W.P.A. Sarala	CARE
	2. Gayathiry Nalinakanthan	Trincomalee District Gandhi Sevai Association
	3. Maduwa Guruge Tharanga Manori Gunasinghe	Oxfam
	4. Manikkapody Mangaleswary	Neelan Tiruchelvam Trust
	5. Jeromy Romain Sellar	Women's Development Centre
	6. Indika Samarakoon	CIDA
<b>Myanmar</b>		
	1. Khin Sway Aoo	Thingaha Gender Working Group
	2. Tial Hliang	Zomi Theological College

## Annexures

# READING MATERIALS

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### 1. PATRIARCHY, MASCULINITY AND GENDER: CONCEPTS

- 1.1. What is Patriarchy? Kamla Bhasin (Book)
- 1.2. What is a Girl, What is a Boy? Kamla Bhasin (Book)
- 1.3. Understanding Gender Kamla Bhasin (Book)
- 1.4. Exploring Masculinities: Kamla Bhasin (Book)
- 1.5. Explanations of Some Gender Related Concepts/ Terms
- 1.6. Breaking the Silence: Why Boys and Men Should Speak Out Against Violence: Rahul Roy
- 1.7. For Every Woman: Nancy Smith (Poem)
- 1.8. Little Magazine Volume VII: Issue 1 & 2 (Book)

### 2. FEMINISM/WOMEN'S MOVEMENT

- 2.1. What is Feminism? Kamla Bhasin (Book)
- 2.2. South Asian Feminist Declaration 2006 (Booklet)
- 2.3. If Men Could Menstruate: Gloria Steinem

### 3. AGRICULTURE, FOOD SECURITY, SUSTAINABLE LIVELIHOODS AND GENDER

- 3.1. Development and Sustainable Development: Kamla Bhasin (Booklet)
- 3.2. Women, Trade, Ecology and Development: Nalini Nayak/V.Rukmini Rao (Booklet)

- 3.3. The Idea of Gender Equality: From Legislative Vision to Everyday Family Practice: Bina Agarwal
- 3.4. Reflections from the Women's Movement on Policy Making: V.Rukmini Rao
- 3.5. Women Farmers and Farm Labour: V. Rukmini Rao
- 3.6. Micro Credit for Profit Mongering or ... V. Rukmini Rao
- 3.7. Water: V.Rukmini Rao
- 3.8. New Forms of Organization to Protect Rights of Women Workers and Small and Marginal Farmers: V.Rukmini Rao

### 4. POVERTY, GLOBALIZATION, SAP AND WOMEN

- 4.1. Winners and Losers of Globalization: Kamla Bhasin
- 4.2. A Time to Dare: Deep Joshi
- 4.3. Globalised World Who Gains, Who Loses: Aseem Shrivastava (Booklet)

### 5. WOMEN'S HEALTH/BODY AND SEXUALITY

- 5.1. How Natural is Normal? Feminism and Compulsory Heterosexuality: Nivedita Menon
- 5.2. The Goddess Ungirdled: How I Learned to Love

- my Belly and Found the Sacred Feminine Within
- 5.3 Turning Dangers into Opportunities HIV/AIDS and Youth: Kamla Bhasin (Book)
- 5.4 Sexuality in Modern India: Critical Concerns: Mary John & Janaki Nair
- 5.5 Morality Through the Ages: Old Strategies: New Threats: Manjima Bhattacharya
- 5.6 The Troubled Existence of Sex and Sexuality: Feminists Engage with Censorship: Shohini Ghosh

## **6. VIOLENCE AND WOMEN**

- 6.1 Women's Rights as Human Rights: Charlotte Bunch
- 6.2 If Only Someone Had Broken the Silence: Kamla Bhasin (Book)
- 6.3 Violence Against Women and Girls in South Asia: Vibhuti Patel
- 6.4 The Tribalisation of the State and Implications for Gender-Nafisa Shah
- 6.5 I Got Flowers Today: (Poem)

## **7. WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT AND GENDER COURSES**

- 7.1 The Goal is Empowerment of Human Values: Kamla Bhasin
- 7.2 Gender Courses with Men: Kamla Bhasin (Booklet)

## **8. MILITARISATION, CONFLICT AND PEACE**

- 8.1 Weapons of Mass Transformation
- 8.2 Gendered Conflicts: A Feminist Perspective on Knowledge of Conflict: Rubina Saigol
- 8.3 Market, Fundamentalism and Conflict: Jayati Ghosh
- 8.4 Women Making Peace: South Asian Forum for Human Rights: SAFHR (Book)
- 8.5 The Fight Not to Fight: Rachel Shabi
- 8.6 The Hyderabad Pledge
- 8.7 Gender, Conflict and Peace: a report (Book)
- 8.8 Don't Stop Crying for Lebanon: Syeda Hameed
- 8.9 America America (VCD)
- 8.10 Redefining Peace: Women Lead the Way (VCD)

## **9. HUMAN RIGHTS/IDENTITY POLITICS**

- 9.1 Universal Declaration of Human Rights
- 9.2 CEDAW Convention
- 9.3 Hand Outs on Human Rights
- 9.4 Identity Politics: South Asia: Amrita Chhachhi
- 9.5 The Rights Based Approach to Poverty Eradication and Gender: Kamla Bhasin
- 9.6 Agency, Inequality and Human Rights: Amartya Sen (Booklet)

## **10. SECULARISM/RELIGION/WELL BEING/PLURALISM**

- 10.1 What Clash of Civilisations: Amartya Sen
- 10.2 Is a Dewdrop Sacred or is it Secular? Lata Mani
- 10.3 A Feminist Position on Secularism and Religion:



Uma Chakravarti

- 10.4 Asana & Yog Vigyan (Book)
- 10.5 Pluralism: Some Notes (Compiled by Kamla Bhasin)

### **11. DEMOCRACY/GOVERNANCE**

- 11.1 Alternative Democracies: Democracy as a System of Governance & Democracy as a Feminist Vision: Kamla Bhasin
- 11.2 Women's Place is in the House, That is Why They Should be in Both Houses of Parliament: Kamla Bhasin
- 11.3 The Right to Transparent Governance: Aruna Roy,

Nikhil Dey and Jean Dreze

### **12. CREATIVITY/WOMEN'S WRITINGS**

- 12.1 Women Writing in India 600 BC to the Present Day: (Susie Tharu and K.Lalita Ed)
- 12.2 Women in Muslim Paradise: Fatima Mernissi

### **13. ORGANIZATIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND GENDER PLANNING**

Gender and Equity Strategy for the Programme  
Guidelines for a Gender Assessment of an Organization

## MONTH-LONG 2009: DAY-WISE SESSIONS

DATE	DAY	SUBJECT	RESOURCE PERSON
21st October	Wednesday	Arrivals; welcome by Kamla Bhasin and Shrii Shakti at 1800 hours, introduction of participants	Kamla Bhasin
22nd October	Thursday	Sociogramming Conceptual clarity on gender and group work	Kamla Bhasin
23rd October	Friday	Conceptual clarity on patriarchy; body work and dance exercise	Kamla Bhasin/Lubna Mariam
24th October	Saturday	Bodywork and dance exercises Discussion on gender and patriarchy Evening: country presentation (Nepal)	Kamla Bhasin/Lubna Mariam
25th October	Sunday	Dance exercises continue Exploring masculinities and working with men and boys on gender issues and VAW/Feminism Evening: country presentation	Kamla Bhasin/Lubna Mariam
26th October	Monday	Women's movements	Kamla Bhasin
27th October	Tuesday	Historical overview of Women's Rights are Human Rights	Abha Bhaiya
28th October	Wednesday	Situation of women in Nepal	Binda Pandey, Meera Mishra and Shanta Shreshtha



<b>DATE</b>	<b>DAY</b>	<b>SUBJECT</b>	<b>RESOURCE PERSON</b>
29th October	Thursday	FREE DAY	
30th October	Friday	Building Communities and Women's Organisations; Mobilising at the Grassroots/Forming Collective	Rukmini Rao
31st October	Saturday	Production Systems, Third World and the Development Paradigm; globalisation	Rukmini Rao
1st November	Sunday	Global warming and violence against women	Rukmini Rao and Abha Bhaiya
2nd November	Monday	Violence against women, militarisation and the war industry	Abha Bhaiya
3rd November	Tuesday	Mid-term review and reading assignment	Abha Bhaiya
4th November	Wednesday	Historical overview of WID, WAD, GAD and Gender Mainstreaming	Abha Bhaiya
5th November	Thursday	FREE DAY	
6th November	Friday	Violence against women and the Legal framework	Sapna Malla Pradhan/Abha Bhaiya
7th November	Saturday	Women's Holistic Health and Reproductive Rights	Abha Bhaiya/Deepa Dhanraj
8th November	Sunday	Normative and non normative sexualities and sexual rights	Abha Bhaiya/Deepa Dhanraj

<b>DATE</b>	<b>DAY</b>	<b>SUBJECT</b>	<b>RESOURCE PERSON</b>
9th November	Monday	Sex workers--national and international discourse and position on prostitution and sex work	Abha Bhaiya and Deepa Dhanraj
10th November	Tuesday	Self awareness and self growth	Ambreen Ahmed
11th November	Wednesday	Self awareness...continued	Ambreen Ahmed
12th November	Thursday	FREE DAY	
13th November	Friday	Religion, secularism and spirituality	Lata Mani
14th November	Saturday	Religion, secularism...continued	Lata Mani
15th November	Sunday	Power, empowerment, indicators of empowerment, gender transformation	Kamla Bhasin
16th November	Monday	Gender mainstreaming; condition and position; capabilities approach Evening: films and discussions	Kamla Bhasin
17th November	Tuesday	Militarisation, food sovereignty & sustainable livelihood	Kamla Bhasin
18th November	Wednesday	FREE DAY CUM TRIP/VISIT TO NGO	
19th November	Thursday	Follow up and left-over issues	Kamla Bhasin
20th November	Friday	Final review	Kamla Bhasin
21st November	Saturday	Departures	