Women's Activism and Transformation: Arising from the Cusp

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Introduction

Development, change, transformation are all fields of relationships between people (Giri, 2002). As such, much theorization from feminists across the world has emphasized the importance of the politics of such relationships, in order to understand motivations and the development of the "self" and "others" as part and parcel of the the development of policy. The broadening of concerns in policy development has often, however, lacked a parallel effort to deepen feminist theory on the terms of the diverse relationships we create. Little attention is paid to the fundamental ability to empathise, cooperate, listen and reach out from the heart. This gap is central and Giri, amongst others, advocates that without emphasising self transformation, we cannot adequately address the problems we seek to transform. All activist and feminist work is greatly strengthened – and in most cases requires – the transformation of the self as an essential step in breaking through the barriers of injustices.

I want to argue that women's activism in many instances has demonstrated a way of working which mirrors Freire's concept of Praxis and a deeper form – Praxis Intervention. While a commitment to Praxis emphasizes the need for a constant cycle of conceptualizing the meanings of what can be learned from experience in order to reframe strategic and operational models, Praxis Intervention emphasizes working on the Praxis potential (practical wisdom or phronesis) of its participants. It prioritizes unsettling the settled mentalities, especially where the settled mindsets prevalent in the social world or individuals are suspected to have sustained or contributed to suffering or marginality (Madhu, 2005). In other words, this approach to change emphasizes turning the internal and external worlds upside down

and inside out to bring about *transformation* rather than reconstruction or reorganization of known concepts.

This has been an almost inevitable methodological approach for women and women's activism to deal with the injustices of gender inequality, where activism has recognized the complexities of violence as constitutive realities within women's lives. Wars, conflicts and social upheavals have often provided the opportunity for this to happen (Meintjes et al., 2001). Where the "old order" is fundamentally disturbed, in times of conflict and social upheaval, women from all walks of life have been known to respond to crisis, conflict, and intense violence (Barry, 2005). These responses have been different in different contexts but the impact of the women rising up has at times been phenomenal. Where many have fled, often it is women who are found to be addressing immediate healthcare issues, establishing informal education systems, working with survivors of violence and offering advice and providing services and support. Some cross borders, and work in refugee camps to alleviate suffering and negotiate access with armed actors. At the cessation of open armed conflict, women turn to re-establishing critical services, aiding return and reconstruction processes, ensuring access to justice and supporting political and economic development. In some unique cases, women have forced peace agreements to be signed or shut down the illegal sale of alcohol through their organized and coordinated efforts to radically change a violent and dangerous context.

These events and activities have happened organically for the most part and are often driven by a single change agent with a burning desire to see the change happening, largely due to personal experience of the injustice. My question then is how can we be more systematic about driving change, especially within violent contexts?

Bruce Mau, the designer suggests:

> "Our work is to solve problems, not merely to state the fact that there is a problem, or point the finger at who caused the problem, or throw stones at the people that benefit from the problem…The single most radical action we can take, the most critical and revolutionary, is to invent a new and better way to do things. A way that changes the world and proves the limits of the old way by demonstrating new means of thinking and being." (Mau, 2004: 56)

This quotation resonated with the learnings that I have gained from my work as a gender and peace activist in South Africa, India and Liberia. I am part

of each of these processes and my transformative journey intersects with the actors as they strive to find new meanings and to bring about significant changes in their worlds. As I observed and documented their work, reflecting on how change comes about in the cusp of experience and action, I too am transformed.

In this article, I describe and analyse women's activism where I have encountered it in these three settings. From the self analysis and personal transformation processes in each setting I reflect on the key success factors for the transformation that came about. I look at the response to violence against women in South Africa, then the interfaith work spearheaded by women in India and lastly community mobilization and transformation in Liberia. From these experiences I highlight the capacity building potential for future work with women activists.

Personal experiences as drivers of change

My encounter with gender activism in South Africa was triggered firstly by my own experience of violence. I grew up in the 60's in East London with a childhood friend, Lesley Ann Foster, and we both went on to marry and live with violently abusive partners. This was a common situation in our community which was not challenged by us ourselves or by our families. As our lives separated into adulthood, we were unaware that our experiences were running on parallel lines until we shared, when we reached our thirties, the experiences of how both our childhoods and lives as young women had been shadowed by shame, secrecy, abuse and sexual exploitation. It spurred us both into gender activism. Our experiences of domestic violence not only made us acutely aware of the social acceptance of violence against women but alerted us to the utter lack of social mechanisms to deal with the problem. When we tried to report the matter to the police we were both individually met with resistance if not outright mockery from male police personnel from the clerks to the officers. We found out that there was no legislation in place to protect women and no services that we knew of in our communities and in our towns to assist women who were being violated in their homes and elsewhere. South Africa was in fact, a violent place for women without recourse through the social or legal system.

I left East London to work in Johannesburg and found People Opposing Women Abuse which I joined 1993 first as a volunteer, then as a lay counselor. I then became a board member and chair of the board and later joined the

organization as deputy director. In 1995 POWA initiated and co-coordinated the first national conference on Violence against Women. Lesley Ann was inspired and in 1996, we set up Masimanyane Women's Support Centre in East London. Fourteen years later, we are both still running that organization and have reached out locally, nationally and internationally to bring violence against women onto the public radar. Our work over the fourteen years of its operation has led us to reflect deeply on the status of women in society, why men are violent towards women and more importantly, how do we build women's capacity to challenge injustices at every level of their lives?

Causes of violence: patriarchy, religion, lack of political will and policies

What we know is that the patriarchal system is deeply embedded in South African society regardless of race or class. Clients at Masimanyane range from very poor rural women to affluent white women, often both being hospitalized in neighbouring beds in the Intensive Care Unit at the local hospital in East London. This has happened so often that the organization is now considering setting up a desk at the hospital to ensure that women coming in with suspicious injuries can be assisted immediately and their cases taken up while they are recovering. Medical personnel tend not to investigate the cause of injuries unless the women ask for help and report the perpetrator. South Africa also does not have a health policy to guide the health sector (Vetten, 2005). The obligation of medical personnel to investigate and report cases of violence against women is thus still an unresolved and complicated issue. Studies show that mandatory reporting does not increase the level of medical personnel reporting cases of domestic violence because it often deters women from seeking medical assistance (Sachs, 2000).

We also know that religion plays a large role in perpetuating dangerous situations for women through the secondary status of women in all major religions. We participated in doing a documentary on South African women in religious communities and it revealed that Hindu, Muslim, Catholic, Jewish and African indigenous religions all perceived women as inferior to men, with restrictions and rules placed on reproductive cycles and all denied access to women to take up any significant seat of power within the religious system. Religious bodies have not come out strongly against violence and are often at the forefront of resisting change and the advancement of gender equality as going against religious ordainments.

As women activists in South Africa, we largely agree that progressive laws, a Constitution that guarantees equal status, and even a political leadership that has accepted women's role in nation building does not add up to a society where women feel free, where women are safe, where women have the chance to realise their full potential. Today, the biggest oppression that the majority of women in the country face is that of violence, at home and on the street. South Africa has one of the highest rates of domestic violence and of rape in the world (Vetten, 2005). In addition, HIV/AIDS afflicts as many women as men. But it is the violence that ultimately tells on women's lives regardless of whether they are enmeshed in the poverty that predominates amongst women or they are the ones who have successfully broken through the glass ceiling and are at the top of the corporate ladder. As People Opposing Women Abuse (POWA) observed "We've fallen into the trap of formal equality, of saying we have women business and political leaders, but too many women still go home to violence and / or oppression" (Shelver, 2006 quoted in Pillay, 2006).

There has been an awareness of the need for national co-ordination in recent years. This awareness led to the formation of three central national organizations – the Network of Violence against Women, the Reproductive Rights Alliance and the South African Gender-Based Violence Health Initiative.

In 1995, the first national conference on violence against women was held in Cape Town to mark November 25th as the day of no violence against women and to bring women from all over the country together to discuss the issue of VAW and to form the National Network on Violence against Women at a national and regional level. This had come about after months of meetings between women's organizations like POWA, Rape Crisis, ADAPT and others to try to raise the profile of VAW in the country and to form the NNVAW to be the voice nationally and regionally for lobbying and advocacy on behalf of the members. All this developed after participation at the Beijing conference earlier that year and the heightened awareness of VAW in the aftermath of apartheid. Gender equality issues had taken a back seat during the struggle for racial equality and the end of apartheid opened the space for women to bring forth long suppressed injustices that had been perpetrated against them and were still occurring in the aftermath, if not at a worse level. One of the studies that POWA participated in which I presented at the Beijing conference was on femicide, a new term that came to our attention from WILDAF[1] in Zimbabwe. WILDAF presented at the Dakar preparatory conference in 1994

on women killed by their intimate partners and when we did the study in Johannesburg, we came up with a figure of one women killed every 6 days by an intimate partner. With this growing awareness of the insecurity of women's lives in South Africa, let alone the rising statistics of incidences of domestic violence, we formed the NNVAW.

Fresh out of years of oppression, the Network members tried to create a participatory and democratically based forum for member organizations to pool their resources and to speak with one voice about the many forms of violence that were emerging from all parts of South Africa at that time. The network brought together all kinds of organizations from CBO's to Internationally funded NGOs with the idea of forming a broad based, far reaching coalition to end violence against women. The National Network on Violence against Women was formed with great enthusiasm and the expectation that it would become a national voice, working on behalf of regional and local organizations at the national level, creating a space for the voices of women on the ground to be heard at the highest levels in the country. This did not happen and South African women witnessed intense jostling for power amongst the people appointed to carry out this task, unilateral decisions being taken without consultation on the ground, territorialism, and insecurity around the devolution of power amongst many other ills that befell this initiative.

Despite that, South African women showed their incredible resilience, creativity and strength. The creation of Masimanyane is a case in providing evidence of what women can do when they are triggered to respond to injustice directed at themselves and/or at others. In 1998, Masimanyane organized nine organizations to come together to critique the South African government's first report to CEDAW and wrote a ground-breaking shadow report that spotlighted VAW for CEDAW. This shadow report laid the foundation for many other countries to follow and write shadow reports to CEDAW. It raised the issue of VAW to the committee but more importantly, it demonstrated the value of highlighting one issue and providing in-depth analysis and research to the committee to raise awareness and bring it into focus. This amongst many other initiatives and interventions and in partnership with other strong organizations like NISAA, POWA, and Rape Crisis has demonstrated that when women work together from the transformative space, their voices can be powerful and irrevocable.

India: interfaith journeys as transformative mechanisms

Searching for answers and examples of successful change, I arrived in India in September of 2005 at the Henry Martyn Institute (HMI) in Hyderabad, Andhra Pradesh. There I came across a project that was an attempt to find out if there was a "women's way" of dealing with interfaith conflict. For three consecutive years, HMI had put teams of women together, from different faiths, castes, class and cultures to find out how they would deal with difference, initially focused on religious difference, if they were in close contact with one another over a period of three weeks on a journey.

Diane D'Souza, formerly of the Henry Martyn Institute in India, describes the women's interfaith journey as an experiment to see what would happen if women took the initiative to shape interfaith dialogue in ways that they found most meaningful. The idea rose from the observation that women were largely absent from or marginalized in dominant inter-faith initiatives. The idea of the project began from dreaming about how the world might be if some of the stories in the bible were viewed from a different perspective. They asked "what if" Sarah's story was told and not Abraham's? Diane and others involved in putting this project together felt that asking "what if" opened a window through which they might see what insights women might bring to the questions of difference, divides, interfaith dialogue and peace. Through the magic of dreaming new paradigms, of telling stories, of getting from one point to another through a meandering, circuitous route they began the journey of discovering "what if" women were given the space to recover and rediscover ways of being, knowing and creating.

The project coalesced into creating traveling teams reminiscent of an ancient Indian method of teaching called "Gurukul" where the learning is through living together and learning from each other, not however with a single "guru" but rather with the idea each participant had something to learn and something to teach. The journeys further transformed from "interfaith" journeys into broader journeys of discovery covering issues of ethnicity, caste, race and class. They were designed to see what would happen when women approach interfaith dialogue in their own way. In the planning, the focus was on what would happen within the Journey itself; how women from diverse social and religious backgrounds would come together; how they would approach "interfaith dialogue"; what they would learn from meeting with different individuals and organizations, traveling in different countries; what the experience would teach them about their faith and the faith of others; and

how these insights might help to bring healing in the world.

It began with a gathering of eight women, four Canadians and four Indians who traveled together for three weeks in India and three weeks around Canada, to explore what would happen if women were given the chance to reflect on and shape interfaith dialogue themselves. Much learning emerged, largely emphasizing how women centralize relationships rather than structures and how the ordinary, everyday practicalities of life are woven into the process. The participants were encouraged to write and reflect on their experience of this experimental journey and the depth of their observations led to an expansion of the original idea to include using this methodology to gain deeper understandings about conflict and peace building.

In the context of an understanding that things are changing but perhaps too slowly, more groups of women set off on journeys to learn about the struggles of their sisters and to engage with the complexities of building understanding and hope. Each journey had a specific focus on selected situations of conflict and women's role in peace building activities.

The broad objectives of the journeys were to identify from women's perspectives, the underlying issues in existing conflicts; to discern the contribution of religious and spiritual identities to such conflicts, and to explore alternative models of peace-building that arise out of women's experiences and collaborations.

Thus the second journey saw eight women from warring communities from the northeast Indian state of Manipur going on a 'study'[2] tour for three weeks. The third and fourth journeys involved an India/Kenya traveling team and lastly a Sri Lanka/South Africa team. The India/Kenya group looked at issues of caste and land disputes, while the Sri Lanka /South Africa team focused on armed conflict, violence and racism.

Learnings – feminist re-visioning of interfaith dialogue as healing praxis

What emerged from the experience of the Journey Project in 1998 and 1999 were some unique insights into the contribution women have to make in healing the tensions that exist between people of different backgrounds in this suffering and war torn world.

This project was set apart from other initiatives in that it was a space which women shaped, created and defined almost wholly for themselves. This included making conscious decisions to move away from certain well worn

paths of 'interfaith dialogue' and to articulate and give shape to what female visions and models look like. A participant describes the environment created by the Journey experience thus, "It was a non-threatening environment, where the impetus came not from outside but from within, and the goals were evolved by self and group. The environment had snatches of a time before the formalization of religion, before the time of doctrines and theologies – when there were only people... It was an experience of moving out of boxes, away from labels, pigeonholes and stereotypes. We were not burdened by the weight of religion but were free to make this Journey our own."

Thus the women set the agenda and the result was an experience of moving away from divisive stereotypes creating a more nurturing environment in which explorations could be made and a sense of harmony created. One of the participants on one of the journeys commented that the journey itself created a microcosm of people challenged to live together across cultures, classes, races and individual differences through the persons of the participating women. It created an alternative form of dialogue through the paradoxes of differences and connectedness, of individual realities and universal experience and of pattern and detail. She says "this journey tells me how I may accept the other – not out of compulsion or force, but because as humans and as women, we share in common the belief that we are not all so similar and not all so different".

How does the experience of the Journey show a person how to accept "the other"? One aspect which seems central to this is the collective experience of a physical journey which created a new story of "we", speaking of common ground, common struggles and togetherness. This construction of the journeys with women of such difference with the focus on finding places where people are united instead of divided means that "the other" became part of the self through the tie of relationship. It confirmed that the forming of relationships is central to the process of understanding. In the environment of the Journey, women who might never have met or interacted came together in the environment of a "team" and in the process lasting relationships were formed. It is these relationships, this sustaining bond that brings about transformation in a person's thinking. One team member describes the change the experience of the Journey brought in her thinking when she listened to an invited guest subtly deriding Christians and Muslims: "I felt the hair rise on the back of my neck and I thought, "Don't go there!". You see it was no longer someone out there she was talking about... Those are my sisters. I know them. That's the

difference: before the Journey, the hair did not rise on the back of my neck. It rises now".

Capacity Building

What was also profoundly learned is that women together are not exempt from power dynamics nor do women deal with these challenges particularly differently from men. Without going too deeply into the challenges that power differentials created in the groups, they highlighted certain gaps in the design of the process. There was an unspoken assumption that women are different or essentially more able to deal with power dynamics differently. This meant that when the issues arose, they were not adequately dealt with which left many of the women who participated frustrated and angry. On one of the journeys, for example, a discussion about class difference arose and the Brahmin (upper caste) woman was singled out as representing the class of privilege and exploitation of others. This led to a deep divide between the women which was not completely resolved and showed up in the women's writings as having left a scar on their experience together. Being women did not assist these women to transcend the deep cultural and historical divisions which were between Brahmin and Dalit[3], Kuki and Naga[4], white and black South Africans, Singhalese and Tamil Sri Lankans. Although they shared the common low status of women in each of their contexts, the assumption that essential "womanness" was enough for women to deal with tensions, discounted the very real differences of class and of culture/ race.

For me this spoke of a capacity building gap which could have been included in the process to teach skills and practical tools to deal with deeper issues that arise in interpersonal engagement. It also raised the lack of ongoing engagement with these women after the journeys to debrief and air some of the grievances that had emerged but not been addressed.

I came into this process at the end and my role was to bring the women back together to discuss their experience and reflect upon what they had learned. The idea was that the participants in the journey would share their experiences with a wider group at an international conference. What became clear from these discussions was that essentialist notions of "a woman's way" had underpinned the journey project design from the outset and had coloured the way that the sessions had been implemented. Many of the women from the original groups expressed that they had been waiting for this opportunity to come back together to deal with some of the issues that had emerged

during the journeys. There was a strong feeling that while women may do things differently sometimes, it was not about there being a "women's way" of doing peace but about women bringing to the peace table their experiences and collective wisdom from where they stand in society. What women have are different experiences to men which shape their understanding and their commitment to peace. Thus the capacity building that would have helped them to deal with the conflicts that arose in the groups involved the personal level of self management and dealing with embedded beliefs and stereotypes of the other challenges, which are not peculiar to women.

The Women's Journey project ended with an International Conference and the development of a two-part radio programme that was put together to give voice to the women's experiences. It was a somewhat disjointed end to a long journey spanning over three years with many comings and goings of different participants and administrators. It provided however a powerful model of exploration which is, however, very expensive to replicate but could be done on a smaller scale using similar methodology and taking the gaps of capacity building into account.

Liberia: finally synthesis ...

In 2008, I went to Liberia as gender advisor to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Liberia (TRC) through my engagement with UNIFEM doing a review on Sierra Leone earlier that year. This deployment came up suddenly and within three weeks I arrived in Monrovia without a clear idea of how I would fulfill the mandate because the TRC was already at the end of its work after two years of operation. Since I had been advised by colleagues in the transitional justice sector to focus on capacity building with women in Liberia, I rewrote the terms of reference for the post in the absence of any structure at the Liberia office of UNIFEM. The design of the intervention was threefold: to assist the TRC with mainstreaming gender in their work, to ensure that a gender perspective was reflected in the final report and to engage with civil society organizations to build capacity to participate in the TRC process. The last point was the part I added in and turned out to be the most significant thing I did during this period.

What I found was that capacity building at the women NGO level in Liberia was mainly understood to be about running training workshops of two to three days on various skills or concepts. The women from a women's umbrella organization WONGOSOL (Women NGO Secretariat of

Liberia) had been to numerous trainings over the years but were still very under-capacitated to carry out the work that they needed to do. Writing, organizational, conceptual, administrative, and planning capacity was poor. While the women wanted to engage with the transitional justice process, they were not sure how to do it. Also, they were faced with political dynamics that they did not understand and they struggled to find a way to work with and around the Ministry of Gender and Development with unclear boundaries as to what was NGO work and what was the Ministry's work.

Capacity building thus became much more than merely running training workshops. We started off with a three day workshop using transformative learning tools adapted from the More to Life Programme, Yoga exercises and breathing techniques and used them to frame a learning process on transitional justice. For example we began with deep breathing as a way of centering and connecting to the self throughout the workshop. We did active listening exercises and drew life maps to go into the baggage that each person carried with them, especially their experiences of the war. We used art and dance to work through the feelings that emerged and learnt new language to express themselves with these forms. The group consisted of 15 potential trainers themselves, 12 women and 3 men with me as their coach. After the initial training we worked together as a team. I met them on a daily basis to talk about the work they wanted to do and how it could be done. This coaching method worked extremely well and the organization were able to benefit from my years of experience and expertise on gender, management, planning and administration. I mentored them on report writing, basic research skills, basic organizational planning and on strategic planning. I also worked with them on their interpersonal skills and on their group interaction using the M2L tools of noticing, listening, breathing and reflecting.

This participatory methodology which insisted on participation and engagement every minute of the process was well received by the women and the three men in the group. They said in the evaluations that they felt valued and that their contributions were important to the outcome so did not want to miss a minute of the process. We then together as a group designed a process for reaching out to community women nationwide to engage them around the transitional justice process. We created a facilitation guide, a reporting guide, a pre-post test and various other tools together to gather information from the women of Liberia which would feed into the TRC process as recommendations for the advancement of gender equality and to

address the needs of women and girls post conflict.

We then set out to hold four community dialogues in four regions of Liberia which covered the 15 counties. At the end, we reached in excess of 500 women aged between 70 and 20. These women gathered out of curiosity of the process but many also wanted to tell their stories and get closure on their terrible wartime experiences. What we found was that the methodology that had been used with the facilitators to prepare them for the work, was easy to replicate with the community women and they took them through the breathing, active listening and centering that we had done in the small group work prior to coming out. I travelled with the groups to each location and coached them through the process with three debriefing sessions a day and constant reviews and changes to the process to accommodate the contexts we were finding ourselves in. For example, many of the women came with little children so we hired a child minder in the middle of the process. We realized that we needed a dedicated logistics person and brought one in after the second dialogue. We changed the guides to accommodate the pace that suited the women since they seemed to want to tell their stories first and get out the experience of the war before they could engage with the concept of transitional justice and what that meant to them. After they had been taken through three days of dialogues, the women spontaneously started making personal and group commitments to peace activism in their community settings which will be followed up by the facilitation group.

The dialogue process was followed by an advocacy meeting where the learnings, information and the recommendations made by the women were presented to them in a large meeting in Monrovia with international and government representatives present. The women were then asked to participate in a process to validate the presentation and to agree that what had been presented was indeed what they had said. This meeting involved the entire 15 member group with each person presenting a part. Again, this participatory way was very well received and commended by the participants and the representatives as demonstrating the involvement and ownership of the process. The facilitation group then held another meeting with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission to hand over the recommendations. Since I as the gender advisor to the TRC was tasked with writing the chapter on gender and women for the TRC final report, I was able to ensure that these recommendations were captured in the final report that was released in July, 2009.

Learnings – the significance of self-reflection and self-knowledge

For women to engage with peace activism in the transitional justice process effectively after the need for confrontation was over, it was more beneficial to have a person with them all the way in a coaching role rather than a training or leadership role. It required patient and participatory work along with a deep understanding of the blocks and obstacles that come from each person's own experiences in life and during the war. Through working in this way, they were able to see how important self knowledge was and how it worked to either restrict or enable them to facilitate others. They also appreciated learning new tools on how to unblock themselves in order to be more effective in their work. They learnt planning, research and documentation skills as well but most importantly, they learnt the value of relationship building and participation when working with communities in order for transformation and mobilization to happen at that level.

Of course, in the time that we had, it was not possible to deepen this process to embed this new way of working and training workshops have been planned for later this year. The idea is to work with the same group so that they can transfer the skills and tools to the women in the communities.

Capacity building

In the debriefing and review sessions that we held throughout the project, we tried to unpack and understand the key success factors. The method of capacity building and understanding capacity building as going beyond technical training emerged as a strong theme. It required that we worked on a deep level of personal growth: on mediating internal and external conflicts and on transferring technical skills from a personal growth perspective by investigating the inner obstacles and clearing them out while embedding the hard skills. This way was found to be very useful and empowering. Walking alongside rather than leading or pushing from behind was also highly appreciated as a much more empowering way of working together. In brief, capacity building was seen as a process of relationship building and skills transfer as part of a long term engagement rather than a once off event. It highlighted the need to bridge the gap between theory and practice.

The combined work of both thought and action where each informs and even reforms the other is Praxis. What we did in Liberia was a constant

dialogical exercise which pushed the boundaries of conventional forms of theory on the one hand and tired models of practice on the other. Greek philosophy anchored praxis within the question "How do we live a good life?". Thus praxis in the gender context is a place where women work and live everyday. In terms of Praxis Intervention, we went further and unsettled our minds and practices by questioning our previous assumptions, judgments, expectations and decisions. In other words, we helped the mind at every instance of discomfort to uncover the underlying limiting beliefs and assumptions and to use the tools to let them go. Some of the women said that they had never looked within in this way nor seen clearly how what is within impacts on how one is being with what is happening externally. It is here, in that place, where the women brought together a stress on the interconnectedness of historical existence and normative concerns of freedom that the responsibility to change oppressive conditions into possibilities for human and planetary flourishing became real. We thus challenged ourselves to being with our own lives, our social political and economic contexts. We named our experiences, identified our own sufferings and articulated the concrete possibilities of transformation. We created knowledge that is self-reflexive and aimed at emancipation and enlightenment. We built a stronger theoretical base for direct practical engagement in peace building. We discovered that this kind of work requires space, and the freedom and security to speak, think, question, explore, give and receive. We sought to create an intellectual environment where we could all think critically and where we each offered new insights, new understandings. We realized that we must create that space together, respectfully and radically.

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Endnotes

1. Women in Law and Development at that time headed by feminist/activists Florence Butegwa and Everjoice Win.

2. A neutral way to bring the women of different faiths together initially.

3. "Untouchable" people outside the caste system in India.

4. Conflicted tribes of Northern India.