

# Foreword by Srilatha Batliwala



Lead adviser for the BRIDGE  
*Cutting Edge* programme on  
Gender and Social Movements

---

*'If I should cease to work, these worlds would fall in ruin and I should be the creator of disordered life and destroy these people'*  
(Lord Krishna to Prince Arjuna in The Bhagavad Gita, III.24).

On December 16th 2012, in India's capital city of New Delhi, a young girl was gang-raped and brutally assaulted for resisting her attackers. She died a few weeks later from the severe internal injuries inflicted upon her – but not before cities across the nation erupted in a wave of protests that brought men and women of all ages and classes onto the streets, demanding an end to violence against women and more stringent laws to punish the guilty. People like me, veterans of the Indian women's movement, were amazed and bemused by this spontaneous demonstration of outrage, around what had just a decade earlier been considered a 'women's issue'. We watched the media coverage and could barely comprehend the meaning of the vast sea of men in the protesting crowds – especially young men, marching or sitting in vigil beside young women, and hoisting placards that read 'When will we learn' and 'Harming women does not make you a man – only a demon.' One middle-aged man had his head shaved in public, a traditional act of mourning.

Somehow, somewhere, a powerful shift had occurred – this young girl's rape and murder, and the thousands of rapes, murders, and more mundane indignities women and girls suffer in daily life, was no longer a women's issue, or the responsibility of women's rights organisations or women's movements at large. It was everyone's issue, because it was everyone's shame. In fact, the traditional feminist groups of Delhi and elsewhere were barely visible in the media coverage, nor was their role pivotal on the ground. As protesters sat in candlelight vigils, there was passionate discussion: this was a product of the society that we had all constructed, together; we had all colluded in sustaining or escalating this mass injustice, mostly through our silence or indifference. The problem did not lie in weak laws or their poor implementation – though both these were certainly in urgent need of reform – but in the cultural and social norms that sanctioned the subordination of women in multiple forms, and provided unquestioned privileges to men.

Even as my heart broke for that young woman struggling for life, it rejoiced at the words of the young women and men interviewed on television, at the words inscribed on countless placards: 'Teach your sons not to rape', 'Teach your sons to respect women', 'I am a woman, I am free, I will go anywhere, anytime'. Protests, marches, and vigils were being organised by groups across the widest possible spectrum – from neighbourhood residents' associations to human rights groups and youth organisations. It seemed as though our feminist dream that one day, all society would wake up and take ownership of the need to empower women and guarantee gender equality, had actually come true.

Watching and listening to these dramatic events unfold, my thoughts inevitably drifted back to a time, fifteen years earlier, when I was on the faculty of the National Institute of Advanced Studies (NIAS) in Bangalore, in South India. I had the unenviable task of teaching the modules on 'The Status of Women in India' in the executive education courses run by NIAS for senior government officials, defence and police officers, and corporate CEOs. The participants were all male – with one or two exceptions – and this was always the least popular set of sessions in the entire three-week course. "Another of those aggressive man-hating, biased feminists, giving us a lot of lies and distorted facts" they would snigger in the hallways, irked by the relentless picture of discrimination that I painted through their own statistics: of declining sex ratios, huge levels of maternal and female infant mortality, the disproportionately high drop-out rates of girls between primary and middle school, the feminisation of the child labour force as girls were sent out for waged work so their brothers could stay in school, and the increasing crimes against women, accompanied by pathetically low prosecution rates.

But while some were dismissive, others were deeply disturbed by this seemingly

silent, unrecognised war against women. Inevitably, one of them would ask: "What is the women's movement doing about this? How can they keep quiet if the situation is this bad?" This was the opening I was waiting for, and I would relate my customary parable...

"Let us assume there is an outbreak of rabies in the city. A number of rabid street dogs have been biting innocent pedestrians. Who is responsible for tackling this problem - the rabies survivors, or perhaps their families? Or the entire city administration, the health department, and citizens' groups in every neighbourhood?" The penny had always dropped by this point, of course, so that I was able to ask: "Why is it that when it comes to crimes against women, or the systematic discrimination against women that is embedded in all our institutions – from the family and household, to our economic, health and education systems, or the unfair way resources are owned and distributed – we seem to feel it is the women's movement's responsibility to remedy this injustice?"

This, in a sense, is the question at the heart of this report – but we are asking it of our seemingly natural allies: the leaders and activists of other social justice movements. What responsibility have you taken to relieve the world of its most persistent, widespread, resilient and deep-rooted social injustice – the subordination of one half of humanity?

There is a strange character to injustice – it often seems to blind its victims to other forms of injustice. Movements against injustice carry the same trait: even as they mobilise outrage and a demand for change among their own constituency, they can be blind to other injustices, and especially to those practiced within and by their own ranks. The sense of righteousness about their cause often results in a narrow, myopic, and exclusionary view - a hierarchy of injustices where theirs sits at the top,

more urgently in need of redress than any other. This syndrome is especially evident in the context of gender relations because women's subordinate position, and the gendered division of labour, privilege, decision-making power and leadership, has been so normalised, so deeply embedded in the fabric of daily life, that it is invisible unless we consciously search for its manifestations.

So even as social justice movements engage in struggles for a diversity of economic, social and political rights, the aspirations and interests of women within these are either forgotten, assumed to be the same as men's, or equally advanced by the movement's strategic agenda. Worse, many movements have actively opposed a focus on gender issues as divisive and disruptive of the larger struggle, and ironically, accuse women's movements of being too exclusive and myopic in their focus. The result is that there are very few social justice movements in the world that have authentically integrated gender justice within their worldview and strategies for change.

What is remarkable though, is that while this problematic has existed for a long time, and has been a source of great tension between women's movements and other social justice movements, it has never been systematically analysed, much less addressed. This is why we owe a huge debt to the BRIDGE programme at the Institute for Development Studies – for recognising the huge gap in our understanding of this dynamic, and for initiating a truly global and participatory process for addressing it constructively.

The BRIDGE Gender and Social Movements *Cutting Edge* programme has been path breaking at many levels. It began with constituting a committed international team of advisers who come from both women's movements and other social justice struggles – but each of us cared deeply about the subject at hand, and gave the process

our utmost. Another unique feature of the methodology was the use of e-discussions to amplify different voices and perspectives on the issues at stake. Participants in the e-discussions came from North and South, from every corner of the globe, and represented an extraordinary range of experiences and perspectives as activists, advocates and scholars. What was a genuine surprise, however, was the incredible energy, enthusiasm and even passion that the discussions elicited. It was immediately clear that this was a long-awaited space for a long-awaited debate – there was a depth and breadth of experience on gender and social movements that was waiting to be articulated, shared, analysed, and understood. It is no wonder then that the discussions themselves became a rich source of research data for this report, contributing authentic experiences and ideas from diverse political and movement locations.

The case studies commissioned as part of the programme were also revelatory. The challenges that women face in being heard or advancing their interests within movements like Occupy and Via Campesina, despite being a huge part of the mass base of those movements, are sobering reminders of how far we have to go before even our more progressive and radical struggles for social justice can claim to have addressed the patriarchies within. The case study of Amnesty International, a key organisation of the human rights movement, provides an example of the journey (albeit uneven and as yet incomplete) of an organisation and the movement it represents to uproot its internal asymmetries and begin to move towards a more gendered approach.

The report you are about to read is a brilliant synthesis of this enormous breadth and depth of information. Our skilled author, Jessica Horn, takes us on a fascinating journey that traverses every facet of the gender and social movement conundrum and presents

us with a unique gift: a state-of-the-art document on a critical issue whose time has come. This report represents the most comprehensive and multi-faceted analysis, to date, of the challenges of and pathways to mainstreaming gender justice goals and practices in social movements. Its power lies in understanding that gender justice falls off the agenda of progressive movements not because they don't care, but more often because they don't know how to situate and integrate it within other movement goals and processes. By offering strategies that have been harvested from the wisdom and practices of many committed activists and movements around the world, it bridges this gap, and gently compels others to follow suit.

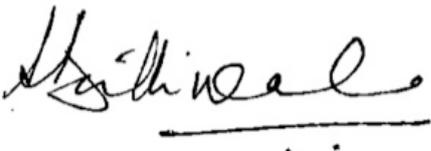
While social movements will gain a lot of strategic insights on how to strengthen their work on gender, they are not the sole audience that this report was written to influence. Women's movements will equally benefit from the analysis and ideas it offers – not only on how to build relationships with and gain support from other movements, but to introspect on their own exclusionary practices. Donors who are committed to supporting progressive social justice work also have a good deal to build on from the report's analysis of what obstructs and what facilitates social movements to better embrace and effectively advance gender equality goals from within all their varied locations and agendas.

The world and its people are transiting through one of the most difficult and precarious moments in history – there is a worldwide economic and financial system crisis; an environmental and climate change crisis; wars and conflicts

abound; criminal and terror networks and fundamentalisms of various hues are gaining ground. At no time in human history has there been greater prosperity or more destitution. Women, especially poor women, and people of non-male genders, are the worst affected by all these forces. Even as - or perhaps because - the past century of women's movements have made unprecedented gains for women, the ferociousness of the backlash against them, including in the form of increasing violence against women and girls and those who defend women's human rights, is intensifying and spreading across the globe in frightening ways.

So it is time. Time for all right thinking people and their struggles for social justice to listen and learn from the young people on Delhi's street corners – to realise, once and for all, that gender justice is their issue. It cannot wait to be addressed 'after the revolution' – it is an integral part of the revolution. There can be no social justice without gender justice. We are proud that this report helps show the way forward for all those who wish to act on this simple but profound truth.

Srilatha Batliwala



July 2013  
Bangalore, India