

Participatory Action Research - Feminist Trailblazers and Good

Troublemakers Podcast Series <https://www.parfemtrailblazers.net/episode-11-with-dr-sujata-khandekar-and-mumtaz-shaikh/>

Episode 11 Hosts Patricia Maguire and Shikha Diwakar with Guests Sujata Khandekar and Mumtaz Shaikh

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[00:00:00] **Patricia Maguire:** Welcome to the Participatory Action Research Feminist Trailblazers and Good Troublemakers Podcast. I'm your host, Patricia Maguire.

Our podcast explores the contributions of feminist trailblazers to participatory and action research, and we talk to trailblazers about their successes and their struggles bringing feminist values and ways of being to PAR. We hope to expand the conversations about an action research that's more meaningfully informed by intersectional feminisms and more connected to PAR's radical roots.

Today I'm joined by Dr. Sujata Khandekar and Mumtaz Shaikh of CORO, India. Also with us is Shikha Diwakar of McGill University. Shikha's research focuses on Dalit women's identities and lived experiences in higher education. Shikha is also one of our production managers, and among her many talents, she is multilingual and will be doing interpreting for us today.

So let me start with some brief introductions. Dr. Sujata Khandekar is one of the co-founders of the Committee of Resource Organizations for Literacy, now known as CORO India. And when founded in 1989, CORO's initial purpose was to promote adult literacy in Mumbai's urban low-income communities. The founder's vision, which was influenced by feminisms and Freirean ideas of critical consciousness, was to evolve the organization that had been led by outsiders to an organization led completely by the marginalized grassroots community members that it was initially serving. As the founding director of CORO, Sujata was actually trained initially as a professional engineer. She earned a Master of Arts in Gender, Education and International Development from the University of London, and she engaged eight co-researchers in a Cooperative inquiry project that was part of her PhD

work. She was a fellow in the MacArthur Foundation, India Leadership Development Program.

[00:02:33] Mumtaz Shaikh manages CORO's grassroots movement sector. Previously, Mumtaz was the program manager of CORO's Women's Empowerment Program. She joined CORO in about 2000, actually as a community volunteer in the Integrated Development Program, and then building on her own strengths, experiences, and passions, she became a counselor in CORO's program addressing gender-based violence, which she's worked on for 20 years. She was elected secretary of the Mahila Mandal Federation, which is a CORO-initiated community women's organization that's 10,000 women strong. Mumtaz was one of seven Indians named on the British Broadcasting Corporation's 2015 list of the 100 most influential women.

So Sujata and Mumtaz, welcome to our show.

[00:03:30] Let's get started with what drew each of you to CORO. Sujata, you co-founded CORO in 1989, and literacy training in and of itself wasn't your goal. It was really a tool, I think, that you were using to work with the most marginalized women and men of the scheduled caste, of de-notified tribes, minority religions. Tell us what motivated you to start CORO with the vision to make all voices heard. What got you started?

[00:04:04] **Sujata Khandekar:** I must frankly say that what I understand about my interconnection and connection with CORO now, you know, and the meanings that I make of those interconnections are much stronger, deeper, and rooted than what they were when we started. So my being part of CORO and being part of founding CORO was logical extension of my association, involvement, participation in women's movement.

So I was working for an organization called Women's Movement Organization. *Stree Mukti Sangathanaye* is called. So I was working for that organization. And CORO is the long form of CORO is an acronym. So it is Committee of Resource Organizations. So different social organizations that were part of new social movements, you know, came together to work for literacy and that's how CORO was founded. So we all came from different new social movement organizations. I came from women's movement organization. There was somebody from people science movement, somebody from readers' movement kind of thing. We were working for adult literacy. The formation had happened for propagation of adult literacy in urban low-income communities. So, all of us felt that working with adult literacy is a way to reach out to communities, to reach out to the last person, which now I think seems very romantic idea that we had at that point of time and has much evolved later.

[00:05:40] So, quite a few of us were part of feminist movement or women's movement. And almost all of us learned about Paulo Freire when we started working for adult literacy. We all were intellectually influenced by Paulo Freire. So it was a combination of, as you just said in the introduction, feminism, feminist values, and Freirean concept of conscientization that came together. And it was all about engaging community. The founders were all outsiders to the community because they came from very privileged background, well educated, well employed, upper-caste, upper-class kind of thing. So, the idea was these outsiders will only facilitate the process. Actually, the adult literacy related work in the communities will be done and led by community people.

[00:06:34] So it was community youth, and women who actually became part of this program. And that's how we started working with people, our communities that are excluded. And especially, you know, when you're from the privileged background, you never understand the importance of education so much, you know, understand meant because you learn, you understand, and because there is a legacy of, and tradition of, learning in the families, you understand that. But actually, we were with the literacy program, we were interacting with the community that was excluded from the realm of education socially, you know. There was complete exclusion because there were hardly any families whose earlier generation had gone to school. I wouldn't say even higher education. It was just getting enrolled in the school and doing some five, six grades kind of thing. So that was the community, understanding that contradiction actually personally led my immersion in the community.

[00:07:36] **Patricia Maguire:** Mumtaz in 2000, how did you become a volunteer in CORO's Integrated Development Program? What brought you to CORO?

[00:07:55] **Mumtaz Shaikh:** In 2000, the community I live in [00:08:00] where CORO started their project, they started with a baseline survey and other information. I come from a very typical restricted family. All the meetings used to happen outside my place. I used to watch those meetings through my window. I was so curious about what is going on, so I went there to see what was going on. Who are these people? Why are they here and what they want to do? In that meeting, people were talking about community I lived in where the conditions were rough, where 3,500 houses had to share one toilet, no roads, no electricity, no water. I used to live in that community. So that meeting was about working towards this community development.

[00:09:00] Some said that it is impossible for humans to live here, so we need to work here. So, I asked a question to the people in the meeting. Why would you work here if this community is mine? We go to the community; we use those toilets. We throw garbage, so we should work. Then the organizer said, so join us! So from here my journey started. My

journey started with taking adult literacy classes as a part of our strategy to start working in the community. So I came in as an adult literacy volunteer, and from there onwards, my journey started.

[00:09:40] **Patricia Maguire:** So, one of CORO's signature programs is the Grassroots Leadership Development Program, and I think it's fair to say you use cycles of action research, if you will, to evolve the program over time by listening to and building off the feedback and insights of the leaders that you trained. And Sujata, you saw grassroots people as both leaders and knowledge creators. And I don't think that was a widely held view in the 1980's. You've said yourself, "we need to look beyond the patronizing idea that people at the grassroots need our help." So how did CORO promote this vision of grassroots, marginalized people as wise leaders and knowledge creators? How'd you do that?

[00:10:53] **Sujata Khandekar:** So actually, what we do currently also with the Leadership Programs here, for example, is in a way personification of who we are and how we evolved. We started in 1989 with adult literacy program, and over the last 33 years evolved in many ways; strategy wise, we have evolved. Adult literacy is not the only issue that we are working currently. So issue wise, we have evolved.

Strategy wise, we have evolved, but the most important evolution is, as I call it, structural evolution. You know, like the organization that was founded by people from outside community coming from privileged background, then evolved to be a really community-led organization led by community, young men, community men and women kind of thing.

[00:11:24] So, in this evolution actually, we call it unique demonstrative proposition, our UDP, you know. So that we realized that it was about facilitating grassroots leadership because whatever we did it last so many years. Never actually the external person worked for community. It was working with community always and just trying to tap the energy, resources, wisdom, everything that exists in the community. So that was the idea and that got evolved.

[00:11:59] In this process, the realization was, as I said, what we do is personification of who we are. So we became a community-led organization. The whole wisdom, action, leadership came from community. And that taught us something about the processes of facilitating social change. And I think what we realized in the process was, one is we have consistently worked in grassroots communities. We have consistently worked only with marginalized communities as CORO.

So what we also realized in our journey was it is fragmented sense of identity that holds marginalized people from acting that they want to act, from saying what they want to say,

from doing what they want to say, from thinking what they want to think, and from feeling what they want to feel. So everything gets restricted because of the false consciousness that is constructed very systematically and intentionally. You can't do this. You can't do this. You are not eligible to do this. So, for example, in adult literacy, the exclusion of marginalized people, especially the Dalit people or marginalized Muslim people from the realm of education.

[00:13:12] So the idea is, the prevalent idea is you don't need to know it and you are not able to know it. You know, so you don't need to get educated. That's how people are just excluded. So challenging that we realize that that sense of identity, false identity that gets constructed, whether it is on the basis of gender, whether it is on the basis of caste, you know, class, actually that withholds people. And it is always misinterpreted or misunderstood as their unwillingness to change. [00:13:48] People think that people don't want to change, but they want to change, but they don't know how to change it. You know? And we realized that this constructed identity is a problem. And if we work on this identity and actually facilitate processes in such a way that people become comfortable with their own identities, irrespective of how society labels it, then the trajectory has no limit. So we call it realization and expansion of power within. You know, like I understand myself differently. I understand my strengths differently, and that is core to the leadership program that we...and that we have learned through our own journey because a literacy volunteer in 1989 is our Director today.

[00:14:39] So he was like 16 years old and had failed in 10th grade, but now he is the face of CORO as a Director, you know? So this trajectory was telling us something and we just explored that into the program and we have a very structured program of Grassroots Leadership Program.

So I find it very interesting, you know, because what we had in mind was we wanted to change the paradigm that exists at the ground, you know, because, for example, people see grassroots people only as beneficiaries or as passive recipients. So we wanted to change them.

And you asked me about how it evolved to knowledge builders experts. Well, that's a long process actually. First, we said we are not beneficiaries, we are actors. So the world said, oh, you are actors, okay, act and we will lead. Then we said, oh no, we are not just actors, we are leaders. So world said, oh yes, then you lead and I will analyze, you know, I will analyze, I will build knowledge. [00:15:41] And then we said, no, we are also knowledge builders and we will build knowledge. So that's the process and it has really evolved and we thought that these are the steps. So our region about academy of grassroots leadership is primarily about collective knowledge building from the grassroots, you know. So that's how

it has evolved, and the challenge in this was primarily people from marginalized communities even don't acknowledge themselves as knowledge builders and that is because the world has told them that you can't build knowledge. You don't read, you don't write, so you don't build knowledge, and that's a linear kind of thing that is emphasized and that gets precipitated. [00:16:23] So to really making people feel that they're knowledge builders and acknowledge themselves as knowledgeable, that's a process. A we think that all the investment that we did in them being action leader is investment for them being knowledge builders.

[00:16:43] **Patricia Maguire:** Let's talk about Mumtaz, your experience looking through the window at this group, coming out, becoming a part of it, and going through the Grassroots Leadership Development Program yourself, and you've grown and changed over time to now you are in a senior leadership position within CORO. So talk about your journey through the Grassroots Leadership Development program.

[00:17:20] **Mumtaz Shaikh:** When I came as a volunteer, my responsibility was not only to take adult literacy classes, but also to do some other training that used to happen within community. There I heard the word gender for the first time. Also, words like violence against women and constitutional values. The Constitution of India talks about the right to live with dignity. All this opened a window to more curiosity.

[00:17:55] I asked, what does it mean to live with dignity? What does the word dignity mean? Because this word was so new for me. Sujata explained that living with dignity means no one can beat you, no one can abuse you or disrespect you. This made me laugh because with me, my mom and other women in my community, I saw we were facing these abuses daily. So those rights that the Constitution gives us never actually reached us. From there, I started learning more.

In CORO, they say that we just don't read about rights, but how do we claim it? We learn that as well. And we create an environment for that learning. That was so new to me, and from there my personal life struggle started. I was very happy until then with the idea of happy family, like having husband and a child. Now that I have started teaching people to gain knowledge via these trainings, one responsibility fell on my shoulders was CORO's community case registration center, that it runs within the community. The intention behind the center is to create an equal system for women who are facing gender-based violence and to support them.

[00:19:48] So I was given the training to be counselor and post-training, I was given the position of an assistant counselor. I learned a lot of new words and phrases during this

training, such as respecting each other and many more. Taking all that I learned from the training. I started counseling.

In one of the sessions where I was counseling a couple. I put all the phrases I learned in my training in front of the couple. The husband said, first, look into your own house. You yourself tolerate abuses at home, and you are teaching my wife not to tolerate abuses and violence.

[00:20:38] That incident shook me, made me really upset and angry. I was like, how can this person say these things to me? I have been trained in this and have been working as an employee. But later when I reflected on it, I realized what right do I have to teach other people not to tolerate domestic violence when I myself was tolerating it. So from there, the battle started for myself, the battle to stop what is happening with me, and also to stop what is happening to other women began. How can I become a support system for other women?

[00:21:30] It was not an easy journey and came with a lot of repercussions. For example, I was beaten and thrown out of my house with a daughter. I had nowhere to go in the middle of the night. I struggled a lot as a single parent. I was working with CORO as a volunteer at that time. CORO supported me through this journey, but financial struggle was still there.

I wasn't expecting all this in my life, but during that time, I got a fellowship. That was my first opportunity to get financial support. With that fellowship, I also got an identity and recognition because getting fellowship was a big deal, especially when I'm not that educated. Getting a fellowship from London was a moment of pride and self-support. I started working with 150 houses and then I worked with adolescent girls. From there, I got more responsibility from the community where the work of Mahila Mandal Federation started in the East and the West Ward. [00:23:22]

So along with my personal struggle, my responsibilities in the community program were also increasing. Sujata was mentoring then and people were learning a lot of things. Now, if I reflect back in the last 12 years, I was a mentor, counselor, facilitator for many sessions at CORO and many more. Now with the state level work of CORO, I got recognition, have my own identity now, I feel that this fellowship and associated training and knowing how to claim my rights helped me to implement everything during my journey.

[00:24:07] **Patricia Maguire:** That's such a powerful story of your development and change over time, and then you sharing your gift of change and dignity and strength with the community that you are a part of. And it's a powerful story of CORO's long-term work and how long-term the work has to be, you know, how long you have to dig into, stay with, support and be a part of a community, it's long term work.

Let's move from that to the Feminist Cooperative Inquiry Project that, Sujata, you initiated in 2019 as part of your dissertation, as part of your doctoral work. [00:24:57] And Mumtaz was one of the co-researchers in that project. So, Sujata, if you could start, I know that this Feminist Cooperative Inquiry Project that together, your group collaboratively researched the meaning that each of you made on your journey of empowerment. So tell us some about the Feminist Cooperative Inquiry Project.

[00:25:23] **Sujata Khandekar:** The research was about meanings of empowerment. And as I said, as organization and as person also, we were evolving in our thought process and then we were at that juncture where we were thinking about thought leadership, just not leadership in action. It's thought leadership also. And the realization was there is so much wisdom and collective wisdom that is there, but it just doesn't get recognized as knowledge or wisdom because formal institutions don't call them as knowledge, you know?

[00:25:58] So that actually enabled us to come together and do a collective knowledge building process and that is what this Feminist Cooperative Inquiry is all about. So it's a feminist research influenced by cooperative inquiry method. Cooperative inquiry, which is a collaborative approach, cooperative approach kind of thing.

It is meanings of empowerment. Again, it starts with that plurality, you know, it's not meaning of empowerment, it's meanings of empowerment because we all made different meanings of that empowerment and that that was also because of the diversity of the co-researchers. So we were eight people together, but then two of them came from Scheduled Caste, two of them were from Muslim community. Even within Muslim there were different sects, you know, one was from Matang community. I was Brahmin, one was from Maratha, so that kind of thing. There were people from all kinds of social hierarchy in the Indian caste system. And we had our different lived experiences. So what actually enabled us, you know, and especially me as a facilitator, was it was all about shared experiences, shared reflections, cooperation, analysis, shared analysis of that. So we shared our life stories, you know. And each life story, we used Paulo Freirean dialogue as a method, so, which was like very fluid, non-judgmental, happens between two people who consider themselves to be equal. You know, I had prepared guidelines, which was actually, we collectively then assessed those guidelines added, deleted.

So one was the whole process was so participatory right from the beginning. It was not that everything was decided and then we asked people to share their life stories, even who will be the core researchers, how we will design the guidelines. So everything was collectively there. Even when I presented the proposal in the university, all co-researchers were present for that presentation also, when we started. And so the idea was, it was research with people and not for people or about people.

So I had in-depth dialogue with each one of them, but they together had almost seven and half hours dialogue with me on the same guidelines that I had while having dialogue with them. And all of us are activists. We are already in the field doing something. So the process of action reflection was inherent to what we did. We used to get together, think about something, share our stories, decide something, go back to our fields, try out whatever we had decided, come back with the challenges, impact or observations, feedback, etc, and then rethink, start rethinking around the process.

[00:29:10] So that kind of...and the whole idea of cooperative inquiry of co-researchers being co-subjects also. So that was fascinating. And we thought that is something that we really want to build as a model for knowledge building at the grassroots. And it is just not research per se, but it's such a powerful and empowering tool. [00:29:36]

Because all of us, all eight of us, traveled so much journey with this research that we were far away from our starting point when it ended - full of energy, full of empowering feeling, this kind of thing. This feminist research actually in cooperative inquiry generally the people working in the same profession come together to fix up some problem. In that sense, their education is same kind of thing, or the status is same, but here we have the continuum, at one end, we had Dalit colleague and friend, who was not even third class, third grade pass, you know. There was Anwari who was non-literate, who had never gone to Madrasa also, and there I was at the other end who had gone to London for doing masters and then was doing PhD at the age of 55-60 kind of thing. So that was a trajectory and I think it was amazing because the whole research, first is we so much trusted in women's agency, agency of marginalized women as knowledge builder also, not just action. And secondly, the feminist aspect of that research was also respecting women's ways of knowing, ways of perceiving, ways of analyzing, and ways of expressing.

[00:30:59] It was so fluid, everything, like we had no rigid agenda whenever we met. And so we shared our life stories with each other. And then we stayed together for seven days to analyze what we all have said. You know? And it was not about seeing what commonalities we have, it was about what convergences and differences we have and why they are.

[00:31:24]

So, I would just give an example. So I come from Brahmin community where education is like a given. In Brahmin families there, nobody asks questions like, whether you want to go to school or not. You are sent to school and if you're a little better then you excel in your education kind of thing. So I was from that category coming up from a middle-class Brahmin background, and then Mumtaz was there who had to drop out from school and then Anwari was there who never went to school.

[00:31:55] So when we were sharing our story, when I was sharing my story, you know, the...we also had a co-researcher who comes from Pardhi community. So Pardhi is a de-notified tribe. I mean, it was notified as a criminal tribe in British regime. Now denotified, but still that stigma remains. So she had done only seventh class and they have their customary laws, etc. That's a completely different story and completely different lived experiences.

So when I was telling my story, Anwari was saying, you know, like, oh my God, I'm under tension now. Your life is so different. You know, because I was talking about that even my games were related to education. Because me and my sister, I was telling my memories, me and my sister, we used to play school-school game. So she used to be teacher and I used to be student and then vice versa, you know, kind of thing. So all my memories were around school education studies, how my parents supported my education, how I took part in elocution competition, etc., etc. So Anwari was saying, oh my God, I'm under tension. Your life is so different and because it was different, actually you could head organization like CORO. So that was one feedback, immediate feedback.

While our friend from Pardhi community, Dwarka, she said, oh, I was thinking because I'm Pardhi, I have grief. But now after listening to you, I think all women have grief because you also got emotional at some point of time. [00:33:28] Actually, this was such a beautiful way to understand intersectionality, you know. Where we converge and where we diverge and why we are like, you know? So it was all about also understanding in the process, it was understanding about why all of us were at different points in the journey. It was not about merits or demerits. It was about social location. It was the social capital that each one of us inherited, you know? So that made us to be a different point. So that realization kind of thing. So I think that was absolutely fantastic journey for all of us. And one of my friends Vinaya, she was saying, actually my feeling is I can fly also now. I think everything is possible for me after we went through this process. So I think that was also immensely exciting tool for empowerment for all of us, including the research facilitator and the co-researchers.

[00:34:31] **Patricia Maguire:** I want to come back to that point about how it was for everyone, but first I want Mumtaz, for you to talk about your experience as one of the co-researchers in this Feminist Cooperative Inquiry Project.

[00:34:55] **Mumtaz Shaikh:** My entire journey is flashing in front of my eyes. Initially I felt with Sujata's Ph.D., Sujata who is the CORO's head, I felt that it is Sujata's PhD, and I am just a case study. This has been the case with a lot of people who just came for a Ph.D. and treated us as data points. These researchers asked the community a lot of things but never

told the community about them. And what they did with that data in moving forward, the community has no idea.

So initially I felt the same for Sujata's Ph.D. - that we were a case study for this research project. We just had to share our experiences and later at least we will get to read Sujata's dissertation to know what we said, once it is published. However, the process turned out to be entirely different. How to do data collection, what questions we needed to ask, how questions will look like for everyone, so from there the entire process started. [00:36:28] The kind of questions Sujata asked me and my community, we got to ask similar questions back to Sujata. And all this led to our journey and learning too. Like how we repeatedly shared our stories in the past for the data collection, but in this process, we were able to make meaning out of those stories - our stories.

Because of this process, lots of trajectories came out. For example, Anwari and I are both Muslim women. We used to think that the whole Muslim community faces the same kind of struggles, but then we reflected on our differences as individuals; like I love wearing burkha but Anwari did not like wearing burkha. Coming from these understandings of differences, contexts and intersectionality is significant. We were taught to see what is in front of us. I remember Sujata teaching us to see things from the top. It helped us develop a lens and resulted into meaning-making. Also, the feeling of being a co-researcher and that I can be a co-researcher was very interesting learning for me. Researchers always used to see me and my community as a data bank, so this whole journey helped me to break that lens of seeing myself just as a data bank.

We were also present in Sujata's Viva and able to share our part in the research process. But we could also see that the administration did not accept us as co-researchers. I didn't have any hopes for this but this was just the beginning. I will claim it soon. [00:39:04]

Also, now that I reflect on my experiences, I realize that whatever I learnt in the research process, it reflects somewhere in my work. It helps to communicate and listen, when someone speaks and shares - where they are coming from and what perspectives they bring, so this experience helped me in understanding that. This is very valuable learning for me. The words like intersectionality, inquiry, framework, if we weren't researchers we wouldn't know. So, we learnt how to situate our statements and arguments in those frameworks. And a lot of the time what happened is, when we used to say something, Sujata used to share that this author in this book said the same thing. So, the other people and I felt that despite not being highly educated, there were people like us who write books and we understand it. So, this topic was a topic of our empowerment.

[00:40:30] **Patricia Maguire:** There's so many powerful themes to build on from what you've said. I think one piece that keeps coming up is that the change that happened over time, different lens for viewing relationships, power, organization, it wasn't only happening with the marginalized community members. Sujata, you and the sort of original founders of CORO also changed over time. That the change for your lens was as profound as the change for Mumtaz and other grassroots leaders - and I think that's, that's powerful that the change was, was across the board.

The other thing about your project, the Feminist Cooperative Inquiry Project was the fight, if you will, to change the way that knowledge creation was happening in the university. Here you bring your co-researchers to the proposal. You bring your co-researchers to the Viva, which you know means that the faculty members at the university who are taking you through this process, it's changing for them too, because they have to change. They have to go, wow, here's all these co-researchers we have to listen to and understand as legitimate knowledge creators. And I know that you also, together, the eight of you, wrote an article for the Action Research Journal in which all of you were listed as researchers. So you know what a powerful project not only in terms of your collective change and work together, but how you're trying through that process to also change the university, to change academia in terms of how it sees knowledge producers. [00:42:36]

Let's move on a little bit to another big initiative that CORO had. A conference last September, you had 18 organizations that facilitated a state-level women's conference on the rights of the most marginalized nomadic tribes and denotified tribes. Two thousand people attended, 1500 were women, and Mumtaz, I believe you had a key leadership role in organizing that historic conference. Tell us about that initiative.

[00:43:17] **Mumtaz Shaikh:** In Maharashtra, there are 18 associations that work at grassroots levels with Notified and Denotified tribes, also NT/DNT organizations. If we talk about NT/DNT, there are many leaders from those communities but their leadership is not seen in the society. Also, when we talk about issues of NT/DNT it is mostly limited to documentation issues. The issues of women are still not talked about. For example, the making of caste certificate is issued to children but not to mothers, and other concerns about culture tradition where women have to prove themselves.

So these issues were coming up a lot and we decided to do a state-level conference to address them under the leadership of NT/DNT women. We then created a committee of 8 to 9 people to plan the conference, mobilizing resources, and choose guest speakers to address these issues.

Initially, we were expecting 700 to 1000 people in this conference, but 1500 women turned up at their own expense, such as travel tickets, food arrangements. [00:45:51] One rural development center situated near to the venue took the responsibility of the food supply for these women.

Women who came to the conference delivered speeches in their own languages keeping their issues in front of the chief guests. One of the chief guests was the Chief Election Commissioner, Maharashtra, and the other was the Commissioner of the Social Justice Department. So, there were several benefits of inviting these people from the government as guests. One benefit, for example, was if you had to make a ration card, you had to pay at least 10,000 to 15000 rupees or more to receive one. Or if any theft happened in the community, the Pardhi community members were being blamed and put in jail. Our chief guests needed to hear these issues directly from the community members. Therefore, we wanted these chief guests to come, because if the state commissioner is invited, the police will come along; if the social justice commissioner comes, then other collectors will come along. So we intentionally invited these chief guests to build pressure and have a long term impact.

This entire event was organized by women from the community who have never been seen as leaders before. No one knew that there was a woman named Lalita who was talking about gender and issues related to it. Another woman, Shaila, handled the ceremony and looked after the chief guests. Another woman, Dwarka, from the Pardhi community, proved her worth through a very difficult process, where she was keeping her points, that had a different impact overall.

Within the 8 days of conference, the Chief Election Commissioner released a circular which declared that only self-declaration is required to enter the NT/DNT people in the voting list and no other proof should be asked for. This had a huge impact that approx 4 to 4.5 thousand people got registered in the voter list.

[00:49:38] Very recently, on April 10th we had a follow up meeting with the Commissioner of the Social Justice Department, where they selected four NT/DNT districts for pilot projects to work on six issues - such as not receiving benefits of any govt planning scheme, not being addressed by village level governance, children's enrollment in school, caste certificate issues, skill development, and housing schemes. Different committees have been created to address these issues at district and state levels. Those committees have people from the grassroots level, not members recommended by political parties. So this was very impactful.

Recently, there was a workshop with 150 NT/DNT people and other government staff focusing on these above discussed 6 issues. The action plan was drafted to work in the next 6 months to address these issues. So the impact of the conference can be seen in these steps. For example, 150 caste certificates were issued by our local inclusive institutions. So things like this were happening. Until now, NT/DNT people and government institutions never came face to face, but yesterday for example, there was a long line of community members to take a selfie with the Commissioner, as these members felt important - that their leadership was being recognized. So how collaboration works and what strong impact it has, it's these kinds of examples that we want to showcase.

[00:52:02] **Sujata Khandekar:** The whole process, the conference and the fallout of that conference is again an endorsement of CORO's approach, which is about power within. Then power within realization of power within, leads to expansion of power within always and that leads to power with. Because you understand that you alone can't solve the issue, so you have to come together. [00:52:28] So to summarize it is power within augmented by power with, leading to power change, something to change, you know, kind of. So that was an endorsement as we, as I had just said earlier also, it was always the fragmented sense of that identity because if we take NT/DNT communities, they're like ultra marginalized communities, you know? Victims of state excesses, victims of community excesses, victims of their customary laws, you know, especially women. So all of it. And I thought once all those leaders who spoke from the stage on that conference day were part of grassroots leadership program. You know, so that unlocking of power within had happened and then they really had no fear in communicating with government officials, etc etc. [00:53:21] So I think that the very endorsement of the approach, like how you unlock the power within and then the trajectory has no limit.

And it was also about believing women's ways of expressing and knowing, you know, in terms of feminist approach, if I may say, because they all spoke in their own language, their own experiences, there was nothing framed kind of thing. And that actually reached to the heart of many people, listeners, including the government officials. And this also led to a bridge between the macro level panels and micro reality experience, you know, that created a bridge. And once that bridge gets settled down, then people themselves will take it ahead. Then they don't need any organization like CORO.

[00:54:10] **Patricia Maguire:** Well you show the power of the long-term impact of the grassroots leadership program that you've had. That once people get their voice and they use their voice in a public space and with each other and people begin to listen, you can't stop that. You can't stop it once it starts.

There's one other thing that I'd like to explore for a minute about CORO, because the Grassroots Leadership Project is primarily adults who now are having an opportunity to grow their power within and use it without. Another program that you have is a school-based gender sensitization program. CORO works with men and women, boys and girls. I think that's some of the power of your intersectionality, if you will, that it's, you know, caste and class and education, but it's also working at the school level with boys and girls in this gender sensitization program to start at a much earlier age to begin to change and explore gendered attitudes and behavior. So tell us some about the school-based gender sensitization program that CORO is involved in.

[00:55:37] **Sujata Khandekar:** This is work with children in the school, stems from our research on masculinity with young men. So we did action research done with population council in collaboration with council. It was about construction of masculinities amongst young men in low-income communities of Mumbai. That's how the research started, like how they get information about masculinity, violence notion, what are the notions about violence, sexuality, how does that get manifested into action, their beliefs, etc. So that was the action research, which also led to a curriculum development for working with young men. [00:56:18] So that we did in, I think in 2003 or something. It said that there is no single construct of masculinity. Instead it's masculinities, continuum of masculinities where at one end you have, feminine boys and at the other end you have macho men kind of thing, you know? So that kind. And that action research recommended that similar research has to be done with young women because they actively endorse some kind of masculinities and discouraged some kind of masculinities. [00:56:48] So they're also part of the whole process of construction of masculinity. So we did research with young women, which is called Sakhi Saheli, like friends, women friends. And, so both the research indicated that the construction of gender and violence, etc, the social construction of gender, violence, that happens at much earlier age. And you have to intervene in the formative age, because once the constructs are formed, then very difficult to actually change them. You know, that's how we reach to the concept of working with boys, young boys and girls in this school. And our notion of working with men, I mean, we extensively work with men also on gender-based violence.

[00:57:35] It is the understanding that men are part of problem, but they're also part of solution. So one has to bring them on table as partners and not just as perpetrators. So dialogue is one way to build bridges with them. So that is the undercurrent of the thinking. And then we work with the children in schools.

This whole intervention, that is also action research called GEMS, Gender Equitable Moment in Schools. Initially as pilot, we worked in 2,250 schools in Mumbai with ICRW and

Tata Institute of Social Sciences. And then UNICEF and Maharashtra government asked CORO whether we can be a resource organization for taking it to the Maharashtra state level. [00:58:25] And then we worked in 24,000 schools of Maharashtra. We trained teachers, we designed curriculum for working with boys and girls in the school. And it is about, it was three years program, so we designed it like, first is introduction of concepts like gender, violence, bodies, etc. Then the second year was assertion. How you can assert, you know, what are the ways to assert politely, but in a confirmed way. [00:58:57] So, and then we worked with teachers. So that was long five years program. And then we also did longitudinal study of all the children that we worked with in Mumbai. And almost we could identify after five years, identify 70% of the children, who had left school, gone somewhere, but we addressed them in their communities, etc, and saw what impact is still remain. [00:59:26] So actually they remembered everything, but they, what they communicated to us was because there was no supporting system available, they couldn't implement what they had learned. And that was real eye-opener kind of thing, and told us what really is needed. So, we worked with both boys and girls and their teachers and because who are generally also the gatekeepers in gender related attitudes. Teachers are also gatekeepers quite often. So we work with teachers also.

[01:00:00] I think it's feminist, not just because it is centered around women. It's all about what feminist believes, you know? Unlocking the inherent potential, you know, to challenge and change. So I think that's the core of what we have been doing in that sense. Also, as I, we were just saying, understanding why everybody is at different point in their journey of empowerment, you know, and then designing the strategy and programs that will address this difference in our journeys that will address the understanding of social locations and how they impact our lives, you know? So I think that's, again, I would say feminist aspect. It's about all women, including trans. We have four trans women as our fellows this year. So actually just building those bridges always and trying to understand the context, trying to understand people, trying to understand the lived experiences of people and just making meanings of that to take the process of social change forward. And it is like, I'm not free until any woman is unfree, you know? But it also, I think now it extends beyond that. I am not free until anybody is unfree. If we see linkages of feminism with ecofeminism, the climate change related, war related, the conflict, everything. So if we see that actually it, it doesn't really stop only at women's well-being thriving. [01:01:41] It looks forward to the well-being of the world as a whole. So we see ourselves as a whole, and I think that's what feminism means to us. We try and reflect it in whatever we do. Not that we are always successful.

[01:02:00] **Patricia Maguire:** I think you're really talking about an intersectional feminisms where you're looking at the intersections between genders and caste and class and religion

and education. I mean, it's the very intersectional feminisms that I believe that CORO and the work that you're doing reflects, Mumtaz?

[01:02:41] **Mumtaz Shaikh:** If we see the word feminism, we talk about grassroots feminism a lot because people who call them feminists have hierarchies in their information, such as caste, class, English language. People see us as people who do implementation work at grassroots level, so people have made their own definitions, including these hierarchies. However, feminists are those who are free from these hierarchies segregations. The feminists, as per me, respect each other, value each other's work irrespective of these hierarchies. We support such feminism. I'm also part of it. People who call themselves feminists and stick to these hierarchies, need to check their definition of this word.

[01:04:02] **Patricia Maguire:** Well, I hate to bring this to a close, but Sujata and Mumtaz, thank you so much for sharing with us today your work and your passions at CORO, all the work that you've been doing. Shikha, thank you for the work that you're doing today. I want to thank our listeners. You can help us expand our listenership by sharing this episode link with your colleagues and friends and networks.

A transcript of today's podcast and additional information about our guests will be posted on our companion website, <https://www.parfemtrailblazers.net/>. If you missed earlier podcasts, you'll find them on the website. That's it, folks, for Episode 11 of Participatory Action Research: Feminist Trailblazers and Good Troublemakers and as Civil Rights icon, John Lewis urged us, go make some good trouble of your own.

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- The conversation and knowledge produced through the production of this podcast aims to respect the diverse lived realities and languages relevant to its subject content and context. Mumtaz Shaikh contributed to this episode in Hindi. One of our production managers and today's co-host, Shikha Diwakar, interpreted, translated, and overdubbed Mumtaz's responses into English for our listeners. Shikha is a PhD candidate at McGill University, Canada. Her research focuses on Dalit women's identities and lived experiences in higher education.