

# Of Women, Wisdom and the World

Interview by Nina Somera

Kamla Bhasin  
Photo from Celebrating-smitu.org

*One of the leading feminists from the South, Kamla Bhasin shared her thoughts about fundamentalisms, Obama, the United Nations, the World Social Forum, feminism and much more. Unperturbed by a plane to catch and a sore throat, the woman was as inspiring as ever, pointing out the hope that we all have to live for.*

***How would you assess religious fundamentalisms, particularly their impact on women's citizenship, identities and bodies?***

The first thing I want to say is that we are talking of all religions, not just Islam which most people focus on these days. Christian fundamentalism, Hindu fundamentalism and Muslim fundamentalism are all brothers in arms and they all conspire to keep women down. I also believe that all these modern religions are patriarchal in nature.

But they all started [with the goal] of improving human life, social relations among people, creating certain rules for human

beings to follow. They started with a very good purpose but they were also started by people in power.

So they were based on hierarchy not only between men and women but also between upper class and the lower class. These hierarchies are built in. I believe that all these fundamentalists, when they want to prove what their societies are, put the maximum pressure on women, making them behave in a certain way.

I also think that capitalism plays a role. Some people make money through particular forms of behaviour.

Women are seen as the last colony when all the other political colonies have been freed. Her body, her labour power are exploited both by families and religions. Women's citizenship and autonomy are affected by them especially when there is conflict between religious fundamentalist groups like in India. When there is war, women's mobility is restricted. They become much more vulnerable to rape, particularly its use as a weapon.

***What is your reflection on the outcome of the United States' intervention in Iraq and Afghanistan and its impact on women?***

First of all, these interventions have nothing to do with bringing democracies or women's rights to these countries. There is no doubt that these interventions have been done to

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## **Kamla Bhasin**

Born in 1946 in Rajasthan, India, Kamla Bhasin studied economics at Rajasthan University in India and later on sociology of development in the former West Germany. She worked for various civil society organisations such as Seva Mandir, which focused on the rural poor of Rajasthan, Jagori (which means "Awaken Women"), a women's resource and training centre and Ankur-Society for Alternatives in Education. She later worked with the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO). Kamla was also part of the first advisory body of Isis International when the transferred its offices from Rome, Italy to Metro Manila, Philippines.

Over the years, Kamla has written and edited several books which include *Feminism in South Asia* (co-authored with Nighat Said Khan) (1986), *Sharing One Earth* (co-authored with Nighat Said Khan) (1986), *What is Patriarchy?* (1993), *Borders and Boundaries: Women in India's Partition* (1998), *Against All Odds Essays on Women, Religion and Development in India and Pakistan* (co-edited with Ritu Menon, Nighat Said Khan (1994) and *Women Development and Media* (co-edited with Bina Agarwal) (1985).

Kamla also writes poems, songs and stories for children. Many of her lyrics have been used in films on women, girls, child labour, mentally challenged people and ecology amongst other issues. Kamla is currently an advisor of the South Asian Network of Gender Activists and Trainers (SANGAT).

Source: Feminist Theory Website of the Centre for Digital Discourse and Culture of Virginia Tech University (nd). "Kamla Bhasin." URL: <http://www.cddc.vt.edu/feminism/Bhasin.html>

keep the American interest intact, to keep the American way of life. War is a huge industry and it is largely on the military industry that their economy is run. Unfortunately, there are Islamic countries who are sitting on a lot of oil – this is the reason for the interventions.

If at all they should be attacking anyone, they should be controlling each other. The interventions are really about this global desire to control resources, have their bases and control the whole world.

The horrible conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan have affected everybody and everything there – the people, the relationships, the culture. By the time men



**With Shields Still.**  
Although the Taliban was ousted by the United States' aggression in Afghanistan, many women still have limited participation in the public sphere, contrary to the promises of the US.

Photo by Steve Evans

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catch a common cold, women are already suffering from pneumonia, so women and children suffer much much more. And because the US and its allies come with their rhetoric, the religious fundamentalists somehow think that freedom for women can be equated with the West.

If I look at it historically, out of all the religions, Islam started off with maximum rights for women. Fifteen thousand years ago, Prophet Muhammed spoke openly about women's education, rights in property, marriage and divorce. It was unheard of to see marriage as a contract and to think of it as made in heaven.

But the Muslims forget that human rights were defined within Islam, that women's rights were defined within Islam. They are forgetting their own past and history.

Everytime you mention the word gender, they think of it as a western concept.

But Prophet Muhammed, Jesus and Gupta challenged gender in their own ways. So I really don't think that the fight for gender equality was imported from anywhere. I think, in any society where there is oppression, there is a desire to resist.

I work a lot in Pakistan and Bangladesh, where there is a notion that gender equality is a western concept. Similarly, religious fundamentalists in Iran see gender as western, especially when there is support for women's school.

Yet money comes to these projects in Afghanistan and Iran. Both countries have really been destroyed and we don't know how long it will take to rebuild them. If at all, they can be rebuilt. Maybe the physical structures can be rebuilt but the relationships between communities, groups of people – they have been destroyed with all the money and weapons coming in.

Our neighbour Pakistan has also suffered so much with what is happening in Afghanistan. Women's rights are affected very badly. As are those in Bangladesh and India.

***What are the major concerns that you would raise to President Obama as a Southern feminist, if you were given the chance to have an audience with him?***

As a Southern and socialist feminist, my major concern really is the global economic system, the global economic paradigm. This present form of globalisation, liberalisation and privatisation is really based on unlimited greed.

Mahatma Gandhi said a long time ago that Mother Earth has enough forests that we need but not for anyone's greed. And if an economic paradigm is based on greed, it will do everything for profit. Obviously it will destroy the forests and put in place more cigarettes, alcohol, drugs, Pepsi and junk

food. They are not just doing this to the outside world. Thirty to 40 per cent of American children are obese and yet the US is the most educated nation that they should know that junk food is killing their children.

Now we are seeing the results of this paradigm in our countries where the best lands are being taken away from farmers, forests are being taken away from communities, and rivers are being given to multinational companies. Private cars are not sustainable but every country is dying of pollution. So many of our children are suffering from asthma, lung and other breathing problems because of the kind of transportation systems we have.

Yet we have the technology and knowledge to create alternatives but the short term interests of a few people are destroying the long-term interests primarily of mother nature, the ecology and poor people. The poor are paying for the lifestyle of 10 per cent of the population. And this 10 per cent are destroying our universe, our chances for survival.

Connected to this paradigm of power and profit is democracy. We don't care about other people's rules. We have created

organisations like the World Trade Organisation (WTO) which are dominated by the rich and powerful countries.

I also believe that most if not all conflicts in the world are for control economic resources. It can be diamonds in one country, gas and oil in another, mines in some other countries. We may give them different names such as religion and nationalism but they are all about resources.

With this one factor, all other things are connected – peace, democracy, women's rights. In my country, one third is under by Maoist insurgency. What are these poor people fighting for? Resources. The

**On Top of the World?**  
US President Barack Obama seems confident of the changes he promised his country. However, there are no signs that his administration would question the current neoliberal paradigm from which the US has been drawing so much power. Despite immense opposition, he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2009.

Photo from Wikimedia Commons

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government is taking away their forest, lands, autonomy and dignity. They have tried in the last several years to protest and demand peacefully. But there were no reforms. Then they started an armed struggle. Of course there is no way that they can win as the state is very powerful now. The only response they get from the government is militarism, not reforms in favor of the Maoists' genuine desires.

So these are the challenges for Nobel Laureate Mr. Obama. But I really don't think that one man can save a country like that. It has to be the large number of people in America who brought him to power.

Also the structures of power are so strong, the lobbies are so strong and these are the



lobbies that control everything. How much Mr. Obama or any one person can do? I have my doubts but we have to live in hope.

***Given the financial crisis, what are the opportunities for women to dismantle this kind of system?***

I don't think it can be done by women alone. I also don't think that women have the same interests. Some women are in this ugly system. There are some Indian women in Pepsi Cola, which together with Coke has become the symbol of economic destruction. We know that it is not good for people's health but yet it is a billion dollar business. Women are as divided as men in our ambitions, aspirations and participation.

It has to be wise people who must lead, people who love Mother Earth, who know that we can only live in harmony with nature, climate and community. I believe that 50 per cent of the world tries to live in harmony – the indigenous peoples, the Dalits in my country, poor farmers and small fisherfolks. These are the people who take less from Mother Earth than they give back.

I really believe in this whole philosophy of the World Social Forum (WSF), which believes in the coming together of different kinds of movements and formations globally. One of these formations is a socialist-minded women's movement who believe in democracy, ecology and peace and with the farmers, fisherfolks, indigenous peoples and working class people. A rainbow coalition of all these forces is required to protest against this kind of development paradigm.

***What do you think of the United Nations? How would you assess it as a space for consensus and contestation, given the many wars that have taken place in just a few years?***

The concept of a United Nations (UN) is totally necessary. The world requires a lot of coming together. But the UN can only be as good and democratic as our countries are. You cannot expect much from the leaders of countries

that are not genuinely democratic. That includes the US which has not been democratic regarding the voices of the blacks and women.

Countries are still elitist and patriarchal. All these are reflected in the UN which continues to reflect neocolonialism, neoimperialism and patriarchy. Just look at who sits on the Security Council, who become the heads of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and other organisations like the World Bank (WB) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) Although they are technically not part of the UN, they influence UN policies.

The UN has not been able to control the US and its allies in Afghanistan or before that, Vietnam or anywhere else.

The UN can only reflect the wisdom, democracy, and peace of our countries and if our countries are lacking in these, the UN will lack these. Our political leaders are not always the most wise.

I was with the UN for 27 years, starting with the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO). And I could see the lifestyle of the UN – upper class, elitist, methodological way of functioning, distant from people. After all the threats to the US from around the world, one cannot just enter the UN building. It has become a fortress. So how can these organisations wipe away poverty when nobody can enter these fortresses? Just what the world is like.

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If we have to change the UN, we have to change every organisation within our countries, we have to change our governments and change the UN based on the values you and I dream of.

Some of us have gone into the UN, thinking that they can change it. I don't know whether we have succeeded. But many of us don't even enter it. But I think more and more feminist women will have to enter it on gender issues. We have succeeded in terms of rhetoric but genuine practice is needed.

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I have been inside and outside the UN and I have always said this: what the women's movements think today, the UN will think in 25 years. In 25 years, it will be able to see on the ground what we saw 25 years earlier.

***What are your thoughts about the de-prioritisation of women and gender in the UN and what are the factors that can bring us back into the radar of the UN?***

Women are part of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). But everything has been watered down. Women's agenda are also watered down.

I really don't know what more can be done. If you ask them, they'll say, "women are there." But if you look at the MDGs per country, we know that very little is happening. Actually people's health and livelihoods are being destroyed more than perhaps they were being destroyed before.

You have MDGs on the one hand and anti-people trade agreements on the other hand.

You cannot join them together. What is happening at the UN is that the left hand does not know what the right hand is doing.

***How would you describe the adoption of women's agenda in the other social movements?***

Women have been part of all the social movements. We have given our energies to the peace movements, to the peasant and fisherfolk movements and others. Of course, most of them are led by men.

And really the world is patriarchal. Our men are patriarchal. Our organisations, our trade unions, our peasant organisations are patriarchal.

And it is not because these men are bad. There are also well-meaning men. But there is just a long tradition of the ways these people think and the ways our lives are run with meetings after meetings. And if women have to do all the household work, they find it hard to be in the leadership positions in these institutions which are patriarchal.

Men have indeed benefited from very anti-women, patriarchal families. But I think many of them have been learning from women. They have learned our language. I have seen some men from the social movements who are genuinely struggling in their personal lives. I have seen them slowly change their language, their desire to be much more gender-sensitive. Sometimes they would want much more partnerships with feminists.

So what I am saying is that men are patriarchal but I have seen many of them try. And we need to understand that men are just completely in the hands of patriarchal values and unfortunately, women started thinking and challenging these much earlier.

We are about 40 to 50 years ahead of our men in terms of grappling with patriarchy. Men need to do much much more work to understand how patriarchy affects them, how



## World Social Forum and the Feminist Dialogues

The World Social Forum (WSF) developed as a response to the growing international movement to neoliberal globalisation. Known for its slogan “Another World is Possible,” it was conceived as an open meeting space for deepening reflection, the democratic discussion of ideas, the formulation of proposals, the free exchange of experiences and the articulation of civil society organisations and movements that are opposed to neoliberal globalisation and the domination of the world by capital and by any other form of imperialism. This open space, in accordance with WSF’s Charter of Principles is constituted as plural and diversified, non-confessional, non-governmental and non-partisan.

One of the spaces within the WSF was the Feminist Dialogues (FD) which discussed women and gender issues. The first FD was held in Mumbai, India in January 2004, highlighting issues such as women’s human rights, sexual and reproductive rights, inter-linkages between the local and the global and sexuality. It was attended by over 150 women from different parts of the world.

The first WSF was organised in Porto Alegre, Brazil, from 25 to 30 January 2001, marking an opposition to the World Economic Forum held in Davos, Switzerland that has fulfilled a strategic role in formulating the thought of those who promote and defend neoliberal policies throughout the world since 1971.

Excerpt of the “About WSF” from World Social Forum India, <http://www.wsfindia.org/?q=node/2> as well as “History from the Feminist Dialogues, [http://feministdialogues.isiswomen.org/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=27&Itemid=124](http://feministdialogues.isiswomen.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=27&Itemid=124)

Photo from the International Lesbian and Gay Association

*Men are patriarchal but I have seen many of them try. They are just completely in the hands of patriarchal values and unfortunately, women started thinking and challenging these much earlier. They have to recognise that bringing up children, being involved with household work can make them much better human beings.*

it turns them to less than humans. They have to recognise that bringing up children being involved with household work can make them better human beings. They have to deal much more with the whole notion of masculinity, the whole notion of power which they have.

They have not done it but we also have at times failed to help them with that.

*How would you assess the WSF as a space and its articulation of feminist visions?*

On the whole, it has been positive. The concept and implementation are quite amazing. There was a feeling that we have some connections with each other. We had our Feminist Dialogues there.

With the presence of feminists at all levels, the WSF managed quite well in having feminist thoughts articulated. And if some of these were missing, I feel that a global network can only reflect what the local and national networks are. If we had that gender equality everywhere, there is no way that the World Social Forum would not reflect it. When we come to a WSF, we do separate feminist meetings which means that there are no strong feminists roaming around in the other meetings. So I say that we need to do much much more work at all levels.

*What are the strongest points of convergence among the feminists from the South and the North?*

Most feminists have been concerned with the environment movement. They now call it climate change. I call it climate destruction. This whole concern about what we are doing

to Mother Earth and what we are doing to the poorest people of the world are closely connected. Then there is the peace movement. The third point of convergence of shared concerns is this whole issue of neoliberal economic paradigm.

But from the North, only those feminists who are at heart, global South can join us. The ordinary woman there, who want an American life for herself can hardly respond to the WSF's call. A white American woman who pictures herself as a white woman alone cannot obviously be concerned with the demands of black women. Only those women who can look at the world as a global family can be part of a global feminist movement.

***How would you describe the latest developments in the feminist movements particularly the call of the LGBT movement for inclusion and the emergence of younger feminists?***

I think it is very good that some young feminists have taken the lead in strong LGBT movements. It has not been easy for all organisers to respond to their demands. Not because the leadership is homophobic but because they hear that the large women's groups have not been able to raise these issues within a movement.

If these movements have to be democratic and bottom up, these issues should have been taken

up locally. I guess they felt that issues of survival were so important that they were not able to take up these issues on LGBT. But other than that, the movements at least in India, Nepal and Sri Lanka raised these issues. The women have responded to the LGBTs very well and have supported them to whatever extent.

I think that we have to thank the human rights movement which made it possible for the LGBT movement to become strong.

Overall, it is a positive [development] but we still need to be understanding and sensitive, why some people are not openly supporting these issues for many, many reasons. And it is not just homophobia.

The religious organisations, not just the fundamentalists all joined hands to oppose the rights of LGBTs. In India, we were all together when the Christians were being attacked. But this time when we were all supporting the rights of LGBTs, the same group was against this. I know some people personally and that they are not homophobic but they are part of the Catholic and Muslim structures.

I also believe that the LGBT movement also need to join other movements. It needs to be a part of the working class women and peace movements, for instance. I don't think there have been enough dialogues. The problem of minority rights is a problem of everyone. ■

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***And the movement moves on.***  
*Young Indian women participate in a mobilisation on the International Day of Women in 2009.*

Photo from Hearts Cry India

