Columns
Social Justice



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by Margaret Gonsalves

Contributor

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The theme of the International Women's Day — "*Gender equality today for a sustainable tomorrow*" — celebrated in March 2022 reminded me of the late Kamla Bhasin, an iconic Indian social scientist, and a socialist feminist by conviction. Her famous quote has stuck in my mind forever: "Men of quality are not afraid of equality!"

She worked with the United Nations for 27 years on matters like gender equality and justice, sustainable livelihood, patriarchy, feminism, identity politics, and militarization, and — with a shared ownership program called the Sangat, a feminist network — for human rights.

As I prepare for activities for the next International Women's Day on March 8, 2023, the first activity I thought of was to write to Global Sisters Report on the topic of feminism. Kamla Bhasin said, "I know enough women who are totally patriarchal, who are totally anti-women; who do nasty things to other women, and I have known men who have worked for women's rights their whole life. Feminism is not biological: feminism is an ideology."



Kamla Bhasin in November 2017 (Wikimedia Commons/Hasive, CC BY-SA 4.0)

I think that to make International Women's Day impactful one needs to understand what feminism is.

According to the website for International Women's Day, "Gloria Steinem, world-renowned feminist, journalist and activist once explained: 'The story of women's struggle for equality belongs to no single feminist, nor to any one organization, but to the collective efforts of all who care about human rights.' "

I want to go further; not only working collectively for human rights but the rights of every being. Feminism demands that we break down stereotypes and discrimination between "us" and "them" and embrace "both-and" spirituality where difference is valued and celebrated.

In educating his nine daughters, my father took a countercultural stand for female education; that was a feminist option that went against the currents of patriarchal society. He made us stand on our own feet, by making education an alternative to dowry.

The family upbringing and education I received made me aware of my dignity as a person created in God's image and likeness, and lit the divine spark of feminism.

Later on, as I served the underprivileged Indigenous people, especially girl children and women in remote tribal areas of Gujarat, Rajasthan, Odisha and Maharashtra; and later, as I served as the Council of Religious of India president in the Vasai Diocese, I became deeply aware of the inequality imbedded in Indian society, and the discriminatory attitude toward girls/women.

Along the way I learned that feminism is not to change the hands that hold the power but to change the definition of power.

There is a widespread misunderstanding that feminists are anti-church and anti-male. That they do not go regularly to Mass and they react to priests; they are angry, rebellious people who adopt a confrontational stance and they are too critical and ask too many questions. Some are averse even to the use of the word feminism. Though feminists are actually anti-inequality and not anti-men, for many the word "feminism" is a bad word!

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I see feminism as pro-church, pro-humanity and pro-ecology, in short pro-every being. While some feminists in the early days adopted extreme anti-patriarchal stances, it is also good to be aware that those who want to cling to patriarchy have a vested interest in labeling and defaming all feminists.

Feminism is a worldview. Viewing life from the underside, it critiques systems built on power for the few and powerlessness for the majority. Feminist worldview promotes compassionate thinking and living. It is holistic and fosters intimate connection with Mother Earth. It views flesh as a blessing.

Feminism celebrates any movement that is non-hierarchical, egalitarian with regard to the distribution of resources, the care of the planet, and dignity of life for every being, and focuses on promoting cosmic peace.

A patriarchal culture trains men to be aggressive and highly competitive, and so it is not surprising that we have so much violence and so many wars. Wounded people go on wounding others, thus perpetuating the chain of violence. All have to pay a heavy price for ignoring or suppressing the feminine dimension.

Gloria Steinem said, "A feminist is anyone who recognizes the equality and full humanity of women and men." Feminism calls for a healthy balance of the rational and emotional in both women and men. Defining the sexes by stereotyped traits, and limiting them on physical grounds to separate roles, should be replaced by the notion of cosmic "being-hood."



Gloria Steinem speaks with supporters at the Women Together Arizona Summit at Carpenters Local Union Sept. 17, 2016, in Phoenix, Arizona. (Wikimedia Commons/Gage Skidmore, CC BY-SA 3.0)

The basic difference between the sexes is an example of how nature creates diversity. Feminists are men and women with different orientation, having intellectual capacity and heroic courage for daringly challenging religious and political powers. In a gendered society feminists are seeking not absolute equality (which is practically impossible), but the right to be treated on a par with other human beings. Feminism is a fight for recognition of the worth of every being.

In her book *Heart of Flesh* Joan Chittister clearly spells out an alternative worldview:

> Feminism is a new worldview … and a spirituality, which the world and the church ignore to the peril of us all and to itself, as well … [it] is not simply about femaleness. It is about another way of looking at life, about another set of values designed to nurture a dying globe and rescue any people too long ground under foot, too long ignored, unseen, invisible. Feminism is about a new way of thinking for both women and men who are tired of the carnage, sickened by the exploitation of the globe, disillusioned by the power struggles and searching … for a heart of flesh in a world of stone.

Standing for equality and justice will make us rejected, dismissed and threatened by men and women with a patriarchal mindset. Only men and women of valor, integrity and intellect will make a contribution toward bridging the gap of inequality.

On this women's day we can all heed the call of Vandana Shiva, an Indian ecofeminist, environmental activist, and advocate for food sovereignty and anti-globalization, who said, "We will either defend the rights of people and the earth, and for that we have to dismantle the rights that corporations have assigned to themselves, or corporations will in the next three decades destroy this planet, in terms of human possibilities."

In short, feminism is a movement toward political, economic and social equality of every being, including the environment. My daily pranayama practice gifts me the breath of fresh air.

If you're a feminist, you are a breath of fresh air, the very vibrancy of life, and part of the solution.