

**GLOBAL FEMINISMS:
COMPARATIVE CASE STUDIES OF
WOMEN'S ACTIVISM AND SCHOLARSHIP**

SITE: INDIA

**Transcript of D. Sharifa
Interviewer: C.S. Lakshmi**

Location: Pudukkottai, Tamilnadu, India

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SPARROW

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D. Sharifa, born in 1966, is a much-talked about person in Tamilnadu and among activists because of the stand she has taken on Muslim women's rights. She runs an organisation called STEPS at Pudukottai, Tamilnadu. The organisation was started because Sharifa strongly felt that there was a need to make women aware of their rights. Her initial action based programmes dealt with problems as they came to her. Most of the problems she dealt with arose from the politics of everyday life. After a research study she did in 1995, Sharifa decided to concentrate on the needs of Muslim women because she felt that this was a much neglected area. For the past few years Sharifa has been fighting to build a mosque for Muslim women that would provide a space for them to both pray and discuss the issues of their life and act as a community centre. Sharifa has received several national awards for her work among women.

C.S. Lakshmi (the interviewer) is a researcher in Women's Studies and a Tamil writer who writes under the pseudonym Ambai. She is currently the Director of SPARROW (Sound & Picture Archives for Research on Women).

D. Sharifa Transcript

Lakshmi: Sharifa, I have known you for many years. But now I have got a chance to document your life and your work. So I want to know about your childhood. Where were you born and brought up? What memories do you have?

Sharifa: I was born in Kulithalai¹. My mother was a head mistress in the school there. I was born there. We lived there until I was three years old. All that I remember is that the toilet was outside and a dog would be sitting there. I would think that it is guarding me. When I used to get up in the morning, I would see jasmine flowers and almonds that my mother would collect and keep near the pillow. That's my memory of Kulithalai when I was three or four. Another memory is of my father removing the thread that was tied around my waist. This is all I remember. Then my mother worked in Manapparai². My childhood days were spent in Manapparai and it was wonderful. Many things happened — to this day I recall my childhood period as the happiest period of my life. We would play, cook food, go out, laugh and have fun, pluck the fruits of tamarind tree...

Lakshmi: How many children were you?

Sharifa: I was the tenth child in my house. My mother brought us up with a lot of love. Not too many restrictions as such. She never compelled me to observe *purdah*³ like my elder sister. But when I was growing, when I was in fourth or fifth [grade], one of my elder brothers committed suicide. (...)

My elder sister was widowed within two years of marriage. My brother could not bear to see my mother single-handedly bringing up a large family and he committed suicide.

Lakshmi: Didn't your father support you?

Sharifa: My father — in fact, he had done his B.A. But when I was growing up, when my father came home I would get scared. He will quarrel with my mother and beat her.

So after I was born, my mother decided that it was not possible to live with my father. My father was staying with his younger brother in Trichy we were in Manapparai. He would come once in 6 months or once in a year and the very news that he was coming would evoke fear in us.

When he came home — one should not say this— but the whole house would be like a cemetery. We would all be quiet. We feared him so much. But my mother made up for all that we lacked. (...)

¹ Kulithalai is located in Tamil Nadu, a region on the Southern most tip of India. Tamil Nadu is the second most industrialized state in India.

² Manapparai : Another city located in Tamil Nadu.

³ *purdah*—(Urdu/Hindi)—literally, curtain; used to mean the veil worn by some Muslim women. Often used colloquially to refer to more general patterns of seclusion.

My mother raised ten children with difficulty as a single mother. On the one hand, she had to maintain the atmosphere at home. On the other, fulfil all our needs but also keep us strictly under discipline. For example, where food was concerned we could only eat four idlis⁴ or three dosais⁵. We all had a similar plate. We will all sit in a row with the plates in front of us. Suppose we had one week holiday, we would each of us carry some vegetable and she will take us to her mother's house. She did not want us to feel that we did not have clothes like others. She was a good seamstress. With no money, she stitched clothes herself for us. At times, there would be no rice to eat for lunch. There have been days when she used to take the first bus at 6 o'clock, collect the money at 11 and come back and cook and feed us before 12 noon. She brought us up with a lot of care.

Now, if you see my school education, I was not a very talented girl. My handwriting was terrible. But the school was well-known for its discipline. There was no other go but to study. I have already told you we did not study with any great interest. We studied because otherwise we would get a beating from the nuns; they will make us kneel. When I was in 10th, we had to stay in the hostel for three months and study night and day. There was no other go. So I managed to pass 10th Standard. And if I had not done it, it is doubtful if I could have studied further. My school was very close to my house. And since my mother was firm about educating us, she admitted my elder sister, my other sisters and me in the school.

My childhood was enjoyable. Only my father's entry kind of spoilt it. Then after Plus 2 (12th standard) I joined college. After Plus 2, they put me in college.

Lakshmi: Where did you do your higher studies?

Sharifa: I did my 10th and Plus 2 in a local Christian school. My brothers felt that we never carried the Muslim identity. They wanted us to show more interest in Islam from then on to know more about Islam and our culture. So in North I joined Aligarh Muslim University⁶. My brother was doing his M.Tech⁷ in Kanpur⁸.

Lakshmi: Did you do any Diploma course?

Sharifa: Yes, I did my Diploma in Office Management.

Lakshmi: How long was the course?

Sharifa: I studied for three years. It was not such a good experience...just went to college. But I got an opportunity to be on my own.

Lakshmi: Your world would have expanded to an extent, isn't it? But by now you were no longer a girl from a small town isn't it? Your world had widened.

⁴ A breakfast item or snack. Small round dumpling made of rice and dal.

⁵ Dosas are a thin, crispy, golden brown rice and lentil pancake.

⁶ Famous Muslim university in Aligarh, a region in North India.

⁷ M. Tech: Masters of Technology.

⁸ Kanpur: A industrial city in the north of India.

Sharifa: Definitely. It was while I was in this college that my father passed away. We had gone home on leave. My father was unwell. It was here that my mother...we don't deserve to call ourselves feminists...to that extent she could...I think about it now. We had gone home for holidays. My mother was also unwell so my father was in the hospital. After the holidays, we returned because we didn't want to lose attendance. I returned.

I went to the college. After about 15 or 20 days, I get a letter from my mother. A post card. She writes, "After you left — My dear daughter, You went away many days ago and why haven't you written? Don't you know I will get worried? How can you be so careless? How are you faring in your studies? Are you eating properly?" And then, in the eleventh line, "Your father died on such and such a date. Then, as usual, "Study well. Have you paid your exam fees?" and so on. I began crying soon as I read it. (...)

In my life, from my childhood, there was no stage when I was comfortable with either my father or brother. They may want to see a film. Suddenly he would plan. 'There is a Tamil film let's go!' Just half an hour before, he would suddenly tell us to get ready and take us. Whether we like it or not. Or tell us to go around Delhi. He would put on Tamil songs. He would bring a radio. They would do what they wanted. Not allow us to do what we wanted. So I could not evolve. With no outside exposure I could not evolve. It was this way, even after my father's death — but I have not seen my mother, with a thali⁹, or any jewellery. But for her earnings, no other jewellery. Not in my entire life. My childhood was like this. (...)

Lakshmi: Sharifa, after you finished your graduation, did you want to do post-graduation or did you think of taking up a job or starting a business of your own?

Sharifa: I wanted to take up a job, Madam. Because, I was with my elder brother in Chandigarh then. He was working in R.E.C. College¹⁰. He looked upon us as a burden. I completed my college studies at Delhi, at Aligarh Muslim University. Our mental growth was nil. We were like what we used to be at home. Even though we were at Chandigarh we could not step out of the house. We peeped outside only when our brother left the house. He was so strict. When I look back at the incidents there, it seems that we were considered a burden and solely dependent on him. Each incident seemed to mirror this feeling. Even sitting, standing, eating—even that was not of our own volition. Whatever they said we did. The atmosphere was not conducive to speaking out openly even our normal feelings. So the desire to come out and take up a job was within me. I was looking for an opportunity. Mother was staying with us. My elder sister was also there. Another sister's son was also living with us. My elder brother was newly married then. All of us seemed like a big responsibility to him. So, there was always a feeling of alienation. All I wanted to do was to leave this place. So the first step for that was to take up a job. There would be quarrels or confrontations every day. At that time, my mother came back to Tamilnadu, looking for a suitable alliance for my elder sister. She wanted me to settle down in the North. I was very attached to my mother. Also, I felt restricted; I was just not myself. I was

⁹ Thali: the wedding chain in traditional Hindu wedding ceremony that the groom ties around the bride's neck. It is also called mangalsutra and is symbolically akin to the exchange of rings in western weddings. Gold and silver are the only metals used and pendant is generally cast in a few traditional shapes.

¹⁰ R.E.C.= Regional Engineering College, Chandigarh is a city in northern India, north of Delhi.

waiting to run away from there. I had to get a certificate from the college. Giving that reason I went to the college hostel and then, from a friend in Delhi, I borrowed money and came back here. I ran away.

Lakshmi: Without informing your brother?

Sharifa: Yes, without informing. He was very angry with me. My mother was then living at Manapparai and I stayed on there. So my brother, to teach me a lesson, cut off the money he was giving. But I was good at Hindi. The course I had done included short-hand. So I began taking classes for others living with mother. Everyday, I would read the newspaper, see if there were any jobs and apply. I was very keen to take up a job. (...)

Lakshmi: Sharifa, you understood how a girl was being treated in your family at this juncture. But when did you realise that almost all girls faced such problems?

Sharifa: I was taking classes in Manapparai. But I was always searching for a job. Generally, from my childhood, I was careful about being criticised. No one must comment on me. Mother was working then and running the Ss good food. But even then the fear was there. Because my brother would say ‘We have educated all of you.’ Because he had educated us. If we talked back he would go to the extent of reminding us that if we die he would have to bury us. ‘So don’t oppose us.’ My sister-in-law hailed from a rich family. She had 11 paternal uncles and all of them were doctors or engineers abroad. ‘She has 11 uncles. But whom do you all have? You have none but me.’ That is why, I did not want to go back and ask for help. So I began giving Hindi tuitions. I would use the money earned to apply for jobs. My mother was there and she was getting a pension. We managed on that. At that time, in 1988 an all India women’s conference was being held in Patna and there were 80 delegates from Tamilnadu. They needed a person who knew Hindi to accompany them. They were willing to pay Rs. 300 per day. I came to know of this through a friend. Rs. 300 per day was a very big amount for me in those days. So I went and made enquiries. They asked me to come. That was my first experience. I was in Manapparai. So from Manapparai, I came to Chennai and went to see a friend. Her name is Ritaamma. When I went there was one thing she said: “The star of hope for the future, please come.” I had gone there not having eaten the whole day. When I went in — when we go visiting our relatives, if they offered tea, we would not drink it right away. They would have to coax us at least fifty times and compel us. We would keep refusing and only then drink — since I was used to behaving so, when the lady asked whether I had eaten — she was from this field of activity — I said as a formality that I have eaten. She took me at my word and asked me to retire for the night. But I was starving. At night, she was preparing to leave next day morning. I offered to help. She accepted it. But I was surprised that she accepted my offer so casually. You see, I had not mixed with many people. So I got up at 7 o’clock the next day. They made upma and idli. We helped a bit. She asked me, ‘Will you have tea?’ I said, “No, I don’t drink tea.” She said okay and drank her tea.

Lakshmi: You expected her to insist.

Sharifa: Yes. We were used to that. So I said no to tea. The train was leaving at 8 o’clock. There were some 70, 80 women. I was scared and overwhelmed because they were all senior activists. I

was quite surprised at the way they spoke and sat watching them, as if they belonged to another world. They brought tiffin¹¹ after 8 o'clock. I felt hungry when they opened the boxes to serve. But how can I say I am hungry? We were not brought up like that. With mother we could fuss. But elsewhere, we were not in the habit of saying, 'We are hungry, please give us food.' So when they brought breakfast at 8 they put two idlis on my plate. When she was about to put another one, somebody called her. I was so angry. I tried eating the idlis as slowly as possible. But she was not coming back. Then I drank two big mugs of water. I was so angry. I drank two mugs of water and sat in my place. Then she came back and asked, "Why do you eat so frugally?" So under such circumstances, we reached Patna¹². I knew about social work and only that. I knew nothing about feminism, and other issues of women. There were 1000 women gathered there. It was a mixture of educated people, women from rural areas, lawyers, professors; all of them were sitting together and talking about what happens inside homes. They were talking about women and violence and domestic violence and about sexual abuse. Our lives at home was different — a woman's role was defined. Once I attain puberty, I can't go out. If my brother beats me, I should accept it. When I was in Chandigarh¹³ I used to go to bed praying that I should not have to get up to attend the call of nature. If I get up, my brother may mistake me. That was the atmosphere. He could not think any other way. As if we were always up to something. But from what they spoke here it seemed that the lives of all women were like that. The same thing was happening in my home. My sister became a widow two years after marriage. I have never seen her stepping out of the house. She would always sit by the window looking out. Another sister had married a person much older than her. But everyone was under control. My elder brother was younger than my elder sister, but it was he who controlled her. My mother was never like that. When that was the case, can we talk like this? Can we speak out? If I am beaten can I say it was painful? When I heard all this being spoken about, I was very surprised. Actually when I was doing the translation, I did not know how to go about it. Because observing all this was itself a big thing for me. All this I was also experiencing and so were my neighbours and my family. The feeling I can also talk openly like others came to me only there, at the all India women's conference. At that time the women's behaviour, their interactions; women sitting together, talking, discussing, eating, mingling, affected me. If I had not gone to that conference, I would not have become an activist. So that was my first entrance. (...)

Another thing about it was, after the Patna Conference¹⁴ was over — about 70 women from Tamilnadu had gone there. We had booked a separate bogey for us. While returning we came via Calcutta. We arrived in the morning in Calcutta and our train was due to depart in the evening. Our coach was going to be connected to Tamilnadu-Howrah train. What happened was we had forgotten to sign in the Station Master's book. We were waiting at 7 for our train. But our compartment was not to be seen. The train was to leave at 7.30 p.m. and we had all assembled at the station by 6.30 pm itself. But our compartment was not there. When we went and enquired, they replied very casually, "No, you travel by the next train." But the women said, "How can we travel in any other train leaving our compartment? Ours was Southern Railway. I think this was

¹¹ Tiffin: In Southern India, light meals and finger-food. An Anglo-Indian word meaning 'snack'. This vegetarian fare usually includes some kind of a spicy side dish.

¹² Patna is the capital of Bihar state, in North East India.

¹³ Chandigarh is a city in northern India, north of Delhi.

¹⁴ The 'All India Muslim Women's Conference' at Patna occurred in 1988 to discuss gender issues, sexual harassment of women, domestic violence, politics and women

the eastern. So how can we? ... It was actually Western railway. "We want our bogey." They refused but by that time, the train started. Immediately, all the women who were standing went and jumped in front of the train. Some 20 women. Some women managed to board the train and once it began to move, they got down. "Nothing doing. We won't let the train move without our bogey." I did not know what was happening. I began to worry. "Something is about to happen. They'll do something. How can people do all this?" By that time, the Station Master arrived with some other big officials. Then I was asked to translate whatever they were saying because they were speaking in Hindi. Immediately, I told them, "We have paid Rs. 7000 for a separate bogey for us. Also paid for water. So how can you do this?" They said, "This time there is a technical mistake. We suggest you travel by the unreserved compartment. We will make arrangements." But these women didn't agree. They retorted, "If we move out of this State, we will be entering another State, how is it possible? Nothing doing We want our compartment." They immediately spoke in a threatening manner. "We will arrest you." Some 20, 30 policemen came." The women said, "Okay, arrest us. Make arrangements for good food and water for 70 women." I was observing all this. It was cold then. Spontaneously, I too had jumped down thinking I must join them for they were doing the right thing. But I was still a bit afraid. I thought, if I have to join them, maybe I would have to do all this. Then when the officials realised that things were getting out of hand, the train was taken where the bogey was. Then they attached that bogey. To me it was something big we had achieved. I realised that if the cause was right, you can fight for it. So I returned from Patna with all these thoughts. After returning, my views, my thoughts and my tastes changed. I began to have expectations.

At that time, my mother was in Manapparai. When I began house-hunting casually, in Pudukkottai nobody was willing to give me a house on rent because at that time, I was very young, only 22 or 23 and people looked askance at a woman renting a place. Their attitude complicated everything for me. It was then I decided to bring my mother and sister to live with me. I am very attached to my mother. That was the main reason. I also had to prove that I am not alone and that my family was with me. Even then, there was an instance of paying an advance to a house owner and the whole thing getting cancelled and a big fight ensuing. They began to lay down rules since I came by myself. People just could not accept a girl coming riding on her cycle¹⁵ and asking to rent a house. A girl who can afford to pay Rs.¹⁶ 500 or Rs. 600 as rent, what sort of a girl would she be? I was also hesitant to approach people. Then once my mother came to live here, I continued with my library and Hindi tuitions. Then I went around the rural areas. Then there were many educated girls in the rural areas. I would mingle with them, give them Hindi tuitions and casually tell them about the workshop I had attended, about women, about education and so on. Not only the girls, but also their families mingled with me. So if the girls were told not to study, I would take the responsibility and get them admitted in a college. I would accompany them for interviews. So the girls also began to grow. I was evolving myself and I also helped the girls grow. This was my entry point.

Lakshmi: When did you learn to ride a cycle?

Sharifa: Actually, when I was 8, maybe 12 or 12 or 13, I had a dream about riding a cycle. I was so happy after the dream. Riding a cycle was something big. I couldn't believe riding in my

¹⁵ She is referring to a motorcycle here- not a bicycle.

¹⁶ Rupees- currency used in India.

dream. I was thrilled. I came to this field and learnt to ride from the girls. That first experience of riding a cycle surpassed even my first flight experience. Even today it is a big thing for me. Did I ride the cycle? I who felt happy dreaming about riding a bike, do I ride it really today? It feels like a big achievement.

Lakshmi: At what age did you really ride a cycle?

Sharifa: At the age of 23.

Lakshmi: And your dream was when you were 13?

Sharifa: Yes, when I was thirteen years old. (...)

Lakshmi: Sharifa, you told me you came to settle in Pudukottai¹⁷. But why did you choose Pudukottai?

Sharifa: Actually, when I was in Mannapparai, I made friends with a girl from Pudukottai. I was working as an office assistant in an organisation for six months. (...)I spoke to this friend about many things. She said, “You think so well. Why don’t you come and stay in Pudukottai?” So she took me to a friend. Just a chance happening. But before that I knew nothing about Pudukottai. Even now the memory of my first bus trip to Pudukottai is green in my memory.

Lakshmi: So it was an unknown place to you.

Sharifa: I was in no way connected to Pudukottai. But now I can’t even imagine leaving it.

Lakshmi: So after you came to Pudukottai, you had this library and then...?

Sharifa: When I began my classes and the library, there used to be lot of meetings. Small meetings. At that time we had gone to a nearby town for a programme. They had a poster exhibition. In other meetings, we had got a lot of information on subjects like women and media, women and violence, women and politics. About exploitation of women. When I saw the posters, I thought, why can’t we do something like this? We had no organisation as such then.

Lakshmi: Who had organised that Poster exhibition?

Sharifa: An organisation called ‘Sneha’¹⁸ from Nagapattinam¹⁹. We asked them if they would help us if we wanted to hold a similar exhibition. At that time there was no organisation called STEPS. There was some sort of an association — a group. A group of friends. There was a girl from the organisation I had worked with earlier and some six, seven of us organised a poster exhibition in Pudukottai in the Town Hall. College students came to see it. We called the local college principal to inaugurate the exhibition. In the visitors’ book there was a good response to

¹⁷ City in Tamilnadu, southern India.

¹⁸ Non-profit human rights organization.

¹⁹ Another city in Tamilnadu, southern India.

it. We spoke to all those who came to see the exhibition. About 30 or 40 people. There were doctors, college students. There were many of them. Then we sat under a tree and talked about doing something. We didn't think of an organisation. We wanted to function as an association and do something. We knew nothing about acronyms. We wanted to do some work but we didn't know much. We did not even register our Association. We put down the initials of all our names and it read as STEPS.

Lakshmi: Is that so?

Sharifa: It was not an abbreviation of any kind. Out of four or five words STEPS sounded appropriate. Empowerment, progress, steps. We took its meaning and saw whether it suited the work we did. And we decided to retain that name. In the first year, I took part in many meetings and seminars. One year went by. In the next year we planned a poster exhibition.. A woman, was the District Collector²⁰ then. Sheela Rani Sungath was there. We immediately approached her and asked her if she would inaugurate our programme. She agreed and we invited her. When she saw the posters, she passed a circular saying that it should definitely be seen by school and college students.

So, the exhibition was extended for two more days. During those four days we never expected such a turn out. Town Hall is a very big hall. And there was a serpentine queue. We were delighted when so many came to see our exhibition.

Lakshmi: These were the same cloth posters?

Sharifa: Yes, cloth posters. At that time we did not have anything. Since 'Sneha' in Nagappatinam had it, we asked them to do it.

Lakshmi: So they would come and do it...

Sharifa: They would come and do it and we would organise it and do all the ground work necessary, so that the message could reach the public. In a way the poster exhibition introduced us to Pudukottai and became an entry point to stabilise ourselves. There was a literacy programme that was being conducted here. The Collector would include us in all the programmes sponsored by her. In the coastal areas here, there are a lot of Muslims. So the Collector asked us to go and talk to them about education. A collector asking me to do it gave me a lot of recognition and authority. If she goes and asks the Collector, things will get done, they felt. So once I took up the responsibility of visiting the coastal areas, I began meeting the Collector more often.

I could not quite grasp much about gender and sex analysis until then. There was a commitment to the job I was doing. That's all. I had not understood the other aspects. All that I had was the eagerness. The meetings were my exposure. There was no point talking to people at home. They thought I was doing a job. And the rule was when my brothers came home, I should not stay out late, I should be home early. But since I was my mother's pet, I took some liberties. But, my mother also didn't make us narrow minded. That was the biggest advantage. If I went overnight

²⁰ Collector is a local government official.

to Madras and returned at 5 o'clock in the morning. I would ring up my home the previous day and ask them to please keep the door open because if I knocked on the door at 5 o'clock in the morning the neighbours will open their windows and look out.

Little things like this, affected me. Why do we talk about liberation? So many people talk so much. Why is it that I do not have the guts to go out on my own independently? (...)

So, first, space — let us talk of practical things. Let us cross this bridge and then, let's break new grounds. We need space for ourselves; we need a place of our own. This is the minimum requirement. If you see in our country, there are many working women's hostels. There are many destitute women's centres. But there is no space for women to sit, to talk, to think, to share. So I thought of this Centre. I consulted Madam. The Collector.

So we spoke to the Collector. She said it was a very good idea. But to accomplish all this you must have a registered society. You need an organisation. Only then can you do it. Until then I knew nothing about registering an organisation. I knew nothing more than that I wanted to work and do something. She said, "Okay, register your organisation. Then I will give space." Only then the organization got started.(...)

Lakshmi: Sharifa, when you registered STEPS organisation, did you want to work only in certain areas of Pudukottai? You described some general problems faced by women, isn't it? Did you want to tackle those problems? How did you plan to work?

Sharifa: When I registered in Pudukottai, I don't think I had planned any particular project or area. I wanted to work on women's problems, basic problems in the rural areas. We wanted to take up issues that affected them the most. But we did not decide on a particular area. Before we could decide on our work and the modality, people began approaching us with problems. For example, even when we were part of the literacy programme that the Collector had told us about, many petitions from villagers came to us. If there was a water problem somewhere, we would take that petition to the Collector and say "Madam, this village doesn't get water supply." Immediately, if she gives an order, government officials would arrive and handle the problem. When the Collectorate recommends it officials would act on it. This work was a kind of recognition for us. Immediately we plunged into our work.

On the other hand, problems like women and violence come to us. Soon after we registered our organisation we came to know that an eight year old girl was raped in a village nearby. We got the news and we went there and we examined the girl's private parts; there were 8 to 9 stitches. But her mother was just standing there weeping. Nothing else was known but that the boy was called and negotiations were on. They were saying, "Let this girl grow and reach puberty. We will get her married to this boy or penalise him, asking him to pay Rs. 1000 or Rs. 2000 as fine." So we spoke to the parents and said, "How can you let this boy get away so easily?" Then we made them file a case; file a FIR²¹. Apart from such cases of violence there were others concerning land, water, etc. And as people began approaching us our work limits began to expand. (...)

²¹ FIR: First Information Report; a document prepared by the police when they receive information about a crime.

Lakshmi: That is, as problems came to you, you began trying to solve them.

Sharifa: Yes, we were trying. This was on one side and on the other was the recognition one gets as a woman. One was basic needs. Or rights you may call them. But I wouldn't call them rights. It was their due naturally. So these are also rights. Also, even to normally sit, talk, speak or to rise and stand, one did not have a self, a self of one's own. To communicate these thoughts to others, I put in a lot of efforts. I should be myself — without knowing words like gender and sex, I had to struggle within myself. For the home I bought a mixie²². Immediately mother — mother had struggled a lot to bring us up — Immediately she packed the mixie and put it aside — “Suppose you get married one day?” is the logic.

Lakshmi: To take it along with you.

Sharifa: To give it to some unknown man. I had to tell my mother, “I go for work and I too feel hungry. You are packing away this mixie for a stranger. Think of my position. I bought this mixie so that it would be handy for me to leave early for work.” I compared this to another instance. When my brother returned from college, even before he reached home, my mother would dissolve sugar in water and keep it ready because as soon as he comes, she has to give him juice to drink. Wasn't I also working? I did not demand it. But the things I bring, why do you...? I had to tell such things over and over again for people at home to understand. The mixie was for ourselves; not for any unknown man. There is no need to spend my money for that. I began to do this kind of arguments also. (...)

Lakshmi: Sharifa, at this point of time, you were thinking of your personal life and your status in the society. And also about the position of women in the society. You have worked for some basic problems of women. So how did your family and the people of Pudukottai respond?

Sharifa: When I was doing this work, for someone like me who was cloistered at home, if I could work so much and help so much, it must've been a natural urge. I could think of nothing but this work. Despite criticism. Someone is seeking help... Because people didn't come to us at first. We went and sought them out. Even if one person brought a petition, my only thought was I have to do something. But within the family, the concern was how to leave me alone at home. Where my mother was concerned, she had educated her daughter to take up a job and manage her life. That's all. She couldn't think beyond that. But my mother is much stronger than me. But she was not aware of it.

When I came here, my brother said, “You do not want to get married because you want to roam with boys. That is why you reject marriage and have taken up a job.” But I began to protest and question — once I asked him, “If you say that I roam about and that I talk to any man, why do you then come to this house?” I couldn't bear it anymore and be silent. So I spoke. He couldn't accept my audacity. He slapped me. My mother said that I had spoken too much. Such a thing was not done in our family or in our entire ancestry — to oppose and question a man. But I had been seething for a long time, and so I asked him that — “Then why did you come to such a house? Why do you come here? No need for you to come” He could not take that. And he has

²² Mixie: Another word for a blender.

done his Ph.D. A highly educated man. A senior Professor. I have never shared with my friends the goings-on in our family. Had I shared, it would have meant that due to that I was doing this kind of work. I did not want that kind of linking. So once I began working, I had no time to brood on my problems at home. There was always something happening, problems to be solved following one after another.

Lakshmi: And was that because the public had accepted you?

Sharifa: Yes. The people had accepted me. Usually, if you see in other cities, this Rotary Club²³ and Lions Club²⁴ only teach basket weaving and biscuit making. But here if we had a programme, the Lions Club President and the Rotary Club President will sit with us on the road. They will join us if we organise a march. If they had a function, they would invite us. (...)

Lakshmi: Sharifa, you said that you had to register your organization because you wanted a site for it. So how did this building come up?

Sharifa: As I said before, the Collector said it was a good idea when we told her about the women's centre. She showed us a place in town. That belonged to the government. So when we went to visit the place, all the officers joined hands and threw us out. So we went back to the Collector and told her about it. She consulted the G.M. and showed us this place. She said, "Don't leave it vacant, just construct a small building with at least a thatched roof. Otherwise things will be difficult for you." After we saw this plot — all those government officers and Union office people felt that we were not in any way connected to the government. They began asking, why do these people need this plot? This plot has high value. They only saw the value of the ground but not the value of women. They did not want people not connected in any way to be allotted this plot and there were some problems. We had been asked to put up something. But how could we? We had nothing. Only commitment and that drive in us that we have to do something. So again we sat and consulted one another. We thought we will approach people known to us, and get bricks, some cement, some sand and do what we can. So we got something. We decided to do the labour ourselves. We employed only one man — the mason. But soon as we started work with his help, they wanted to stop us. They would come and ease themselves all over the place. We would clean up the whole place the next morning and start work all over again. Otherwise they would spread Nirodh²⁵ condom packets all over. As though we were building a prostitution centre. They could not go against the Collector. So they thought that we would run away if they did all this. Until then we had never seen a condom. (...)

In a school here they had invited me to talk on women's education. So I had gone there. All the students stood up and a girl stood up. She must be from the 7th or 8th Standard. She said, "You have come to our school to talk about education for girls. It is indeed a very good thing. This school has a good library and even a good auditorium. But we are grown up girls. Every month we get our periods. But there is no toilet for us nor water. Do you know how many times we

²³ Rotary Club: An international club (made up for businesses leaders and professionals) with locations throughout the world, dedicated to humanitarian services.

²⁴ Lions Club: Also an international network of clubs (started in Chicago). A voluntary organization dedicated to improving community conditions.

²⁵ Noridh: Brand of condoms.

have been humiliated in the class? Can't you do something about it? Then how can we study?" I felt as though somebody had slapped me. Because this problem was not confined to just one government school in Pudukottai. In every government school, in every government office, this problem was there. So a project to build a latrine in that village was sent. Not that we did it. We had been insisting on it for 15 years. We don't have to study in Oxford University for this. This was a common reality. But that even something as common place as this had to be pointed out, pained me. So beginning with the latrine, women needed space, to sit, to talk... If one missed the night bus one could go to STEPS, relax, sleep... So keeping all this in mind we began the building work. Actually we started in '92 but it was completed only in '96.

Lakshmi: After 4 years!

Sharifa: Yes, 4 years. We could not manage. At that time this office was not there. There was no kitchen. Only the hall below. To build that hall downstairs, we struggled so much. You can say that along with our struggles, we grew. (...)

Anyhow, in spite of all problems this Women's Centre came up because women needed a space of our own. Women who come here to do their marketing, to seek admission in school and college or to visit the hospital. To give petitions. Any ordinary woman will come and relax here for a couple of minutes.

Lakshmi: To relax.

Sharifa: To sit, relax, talk — for all this we built this Centre. It is now a place for everyone. Women come and stay here also. (...)

Lakshmi: Sharifa, there have been caste riots and communal riots in many places in Tamilnadu. And you have gone to visit such places. And STEPS has done a lot to restore communal harmony. Can you tell us about your experiences?

Sharifa: Generally, after I came to this field, instances of communal riots in Tamilnadu have been very few. Even then, in 1994, that was my first experience in Pudukottai. There is a place called Kasim Pudupettai, on the border between Pudukottai and Tanjavur. There was a big fight between two communities. The parties involved were all rich. It started as business competition and turned into a communal riot. The M.L.A.²⁶ of that area, was singling out shops and houses belonging to Muslims and burning them down. There were heavy losses. We were working among students then and one of the students from there told us about this happening. Apart from me, in Madurai there was SOCOT, a lawyers' collective. I took them along with me there. The houses there were made with material brought from abroad. Petrol had been poured over them and huge bombs were exploded to raze them to the ground. There were heavy losses like that. In addition to that, there were 7, 8 pregnant women who were beaten when they were running away. They had suffered miscarriages. We organised a peace meeting, to reach the message to the Collector. A petition had already gone to him. All this was already being done but we made a special effort and organised a peace meeting with these people in the Town Hall. At that peace

²⁶ MLA: Member of Legislative Assembly is a representative elected by the voters of an electoral district to the Legislature of a State in the Indian system of government.

meeting, there were many M.L.As, Jamaat²⁷ leaders, some big shots and traders. We were the only two women.. They spoke about lakhs²⁸ lost. Tyre factory was lost and so on. So each one spoke and when it was my turn, I said, “Yes, his loss was Rs. 10 lakhs and this one’s was about 7 lakhs and someone a house. In the same way, those girls who ran lost their honour. They suffered abortions²⁹. This was an enormous act of violence against women. So just as you compensate for other losses, action must also be taken on people who perpetrated this. But this rebounded on us. They got hold of a few people who had accompanied us and asked how what they had spoken about their women could be revealed.

‘A Muslim girl who has not even covered her head is talking about this.’ Those who had taken me took me aside and said, “Madam, in this place, you talk about education, talk about health, but not about these matters.” I was flabbergasted.

Then they immediately rang up my house and told them that their daughter was acting against religion. Only then I realised the position I was in. On the one hand I was from the minority, and on the other, there was this issue. Another communal riot in Nagoor followed this. I had gone there with the PUCL³⁰ Fact Finding Team. In many places there things were still burning. No one had gone there. As if the intention was to destroy all the Muslims. An old woman was almost dying. In another part, there was a twenty year old woman. You must be knowing about observing Idda. When a woman is widowed or divorced she must observe Idda for 40 days. She was observing Idda. About twenty years old she was. She was sitting with two children. She was pregnant with another. When I enquired, she said, “I don’t know what happened. My husband went to buy a coconut but he came back as a dead body. I don’t know what happened.” When so unaware of happenings these women were, tomorrow if one of them becomes a sex-worker or walks on the road, as a destitute, who would be responsible was the question. These women were totally unaware. So we met the S.P. and did rehabilitation work. But I was not satisfied.

So on our own, we held communal harmony meetings with the help of some organisations. Because if I had it done it on my own, they would have seen me as a Muslim. From both sides, we were being attacked. The general opinion among Hindus was that I was supporting the Muslims. The Muslims commented, “This woman does not cover her head nor does she follow Islamic rules. So who is she to work for Muslims? She is doing some mischief from within.” So I was under fire from both sides even then. Despite that what we did was to join the Trichi group Thamizhaga Pengal Ezuchi Amaippu (Women’s Awareness Group) who had organised a journey from Kanyakumari to Chennai. We joined them and held 25 public meetings. (...)

Lakshmi: Sharifa, on behalf of women of the Dalit community and the Minority Community STEPS has raised questions and taken action. Can you tell us about it?

Sharifa: Our overall work is to work for women. A woman must get social recognition. Whether the problems arise from being Dalits, or of a particular religion, or social or family problems we look at them from the women’s angle. We have done a lot of work for the Dalits. We have

²⁷ The Islamic and political party working in Pakistan since 1940.

²⁸ Lakhs: 100,000 Rupees.

²⁹ She means “miscarriages” here, not elected abortions.

³⁰ PUCL: People's Union for Civil Liberties is India's oldest and largest human rights organization.

provided basic amenities for more than 100 villages as a part of Community Development. But we have not seen them as specifically Dalits when we deal with people's problems. I can say two things about matters concerning Dalits. If you look at it from the angle of women and violence, I will relate one incident. There was a Dalit person here, who was already married. He kidnapped a 15-16 year old girl and took her away. He took the girl away in the name of love. But immediately the very next day some two three people looked for them and brought them back and also the two friends who had helped them. Then they held a Panchayat meeting. There were Dalits there, some leaders, and also members of other community, the Kallar community. The Panchayat leader finally ordered them to be tonsured³¹. The man who kidnapped the girl, and his mother — all three had their head shaven clean and it became a problem. They came here to the office with their tonsured heads. They explained what had happened. They did not explain that he was a married man. We saw this injustice and we sent them to the police station to file a case under the PCR Act³². Next day his wife turned up. "Madam, he is my husband. And I was the one who complained. My husband married a second time. So that is why they did this." "So you take whatever action you want." I said, "Even if he had done this it was wrong to tonsure him. He was also wrong in marrying a second time. Give me a petition. Let me see." We accepted her petition. Until then the news of this second marriage had not spread among the Dalits. And the 'Pudhiya Tamizhagam Party hadn't set foot here. Soon as they came to know, those people came here. "His second marriage is a family problem. Only the tonsuring is a social issue. You should not take up this issue. Withdraw it," they told me. I said, "How I can I not take it up?" Members of the Association for Inter-caste Marriage came. "Since this is an inter-caste matter, you should not take it up." I retorted, "You take up problems of inter-caste marriages and also Dalit problems. And also say that I should not. But isn't this second marriage wrong? So I will question that too." Then the Dalit leaders and others came to my office to threaten us. "You do not know me. I have been to jail under TADA³³, under POTA³⁴. You do not know about us." They printed posters that we are anti-Dalit. They said I know nothing about Dalits. I told them, "I have worked a lot more with Dalits than all of you ever have. I have dealt with many cases you have never heard of. Since you have come to my organisation, speak only about women. If you want to talk about your caste, religion and your people go outside and talk." It became a complicated political issue to deal with. 'Pudhiya Thamizhagam' was able to establish itself in

³¹ To have one's head shaved (is not necessarily a mark of shame).

³² PCR Act: Protection of Civil Rights Act. Protected Individuals from being categorized as "untouchable."

³³The Terrorist and Disruptive Activities Act 1987 (TADA) established special courts or "designated courts" to try those arrested for terrorist acts and disruptive activities. It conferred broad discretion upon the authorities to arrest persons and to try them. One of the most important points about TADA was the effect it had on the population of Punjab; it erased the distinction between violent and peaceful protests. Under TADA a person could be detained, without charge or trial for suspicion of belonging to, supporting or having knowledge of militant groups. The police were given strong search and seizure powers under the Act, they could indict any person on the basis of suspicion. Once indicted under TADA, the accused would be tried by a special court under extraordinary procedures. In such trials, protections normally available to an accused in a liberal society would be ignored. Once under trial the accused could be convicted on the basis of minimal evidence that would have been insufficient for conviction by an ordinary court under normal Indian law.

³⁴POTA: The Prevention of Terrorism Act. POTA was enacted soon after the September 11, 2001 attacks on the United States and the adoption of a United Nations Security Council resolution against terrorism. The legislation allowed security agencies to hold suspects for up to 180 days without filing charges. In practice, the law was often used against marginalized communities such as Dalits (so-called "untouchables"), indigenous groups, Muslims, and the political opposition (from: <http://hrw.org/english/docs/2004/09/22/india9370.htm>). This act has been repealed.

Pudukkottai on the basis of this case. Krishnaswamy announced that he will walk from here to Viralimalai. There was all such internal politics taking place.

But if you see it as a community-based problem, you have to accept that atrocities are committed on Dalits. We have not ignored the fact that basic rights are denied to them. There is a village called Aranthangi. It is not exactly a village, it comes under the revenue department. There are 100 Dalit families there. Government had given title deeds of three cents of land each and built houses for them. Not built a house but given them a plot. They had put up thatched roofs. The floor is made of mud. They have to spread cow dung over it and this is the way they live. It was a low-lying area. When it rains, water gets collected. The land there had been bought by other caste people who had bribed the government and built houses. So during monsoon, rainwater will enter the huts. So during monsoon, the women will not go to work for they can't leave children and aged people behind. So they would have to go without food that day. At least 2 or 3 people will die every monsoon, every year. This had been going on for 10 years. These Dalit women have been making trips to the government offices and the Taluka offices. But nobody cared for them there.

This problem was brought to our notice in '97. So we went there to find out. We spoke to them. So we decided to bring the problem to public notice and went on a hunger strike. Then the Minister's car arrived. But the police surrounded us to hide us from view. But these women went and stood right in the middle. Immediately the Minister goes down. The Collector said, "Within a month, I will set everything right. So please don't make it an issue." We agreed and let it go. Two years went by. For two years there was no rain. Third year, it began pouring. So I took a final decision. Whatever struggle it is what we do is to keep the affected people in the forefront; we would be there only as consultants. But we would present the issues. We told the people." This is our last attempt. Anyhow, during monsoon 2 or 3 of us are going to die. So let us all go en masse to the Collector's office and sit there and die." What I did was, I told them, "It is going to rain here. And we don't have a house. So let us go and live in the Collectorate." The people agreed. Then we set a date and planned that on that date, we will take all our belongings, food, goats and cows and load everything in a lorry and go and sit there. Come what may.

So when we organised that, others in the women's movement were also with us. STEPS does not have a specific village. We join hands with others. What's being done is important.

Then we sat with the Adi Dravida officer and prepared a statement and within a month, the government gave alternate land to them and made sure that the allotted amount was not routed elsewhere. An issue that had dragged on for 10 years got solved in 3 years. We were ecstatic when the case got over. Looking back we wonder how we overcome all that. Of all the struggles we took up, this was the biggest. (...)

Lakshmi: It was different in Mettuppatti. There you got them land title deeds.

Sharifa: The problem with Mettuppatti was — usually in a domestic quarrel, the husband will order the wife to leave have the house. To put an end to that, we got title deeds allotted to women. So far we have got 3000 title deeds bearing names of women. In Pudukkottai.

Lakshmi: Land registration papers?

Sharifa: Land registration papers. Once upon a time that place was occupied by refugees. But they had left. It is a 30-year old history. People from different backgrounds had settled there for the past 20 to 25 years.

Lakshmi: Not any particular community?

Sharifa: No, it included people from all communities.

Lakshmi: All communities...

Sharifa: Dalits are also there. Most of the families were Dalits. Most of them were labourers. In 90% of the families both man and woman have to work to fill their stomach. They had been there for 20 years and not one had a ration card and that place had no land deeds. No election card either. There was a girl working in our office here. She had been victimised once. We posted her there. We made her get all the details about that area and after a struggle of 2 or 3 years, we got them land title deeds, ration card and election card. We built a 'Balwadi'³⁵ for them. We got roads and pipes laid and now that is a model village. (...)

Lakshmi: Sharifa, STEPS has tackled many issues on women and violence. Can you tell us about some cases?

Sharifa: Now there are two kinds of violence against women. One is psychological. Another is physical. When these women bring the cases to us, even they are not aware of how bad the psychological torture has been.

What we do generally is, when we get a petition, we'll talk to the concerned person and see how it goes. We'll talk to the man also. If that goes okay we will warn them or keep a close watch on them. Otherwise, if there is no rapprochement, we will tell the boy to fulfil all her needs. Whatever she needs, depending on his financial condition. The third option is to file a case in the police station. (...)

Lakshmi: Apart from problems arising out of domestic strife, the problems women encounter in public have also been taken up by STEPS, isn't it? You once told me about the women who sold cucumber. Can you talk about that.

Sharifa: All the cases are related to women. Whatever issue we take up. But how they face the problems and how successful we are in getting a fair deal is important. We intervene in whichever way we can. Now this cucumber problem, there are two bus stands in Pudukottai. One is old and the other is new. This bus stand has been here for the past 25 years. Women from the villages around Pudukottai, specially, widows, or who have been oppressed and thrown out by their husbands or old mothers not cared for by their children, they would buy cucumber in bulk and sell it at the bus stand. They earn about Rs. 50 to Rs. 60 daily. And they live on that. I have seen this ever since I came to Pudukottai. It was the normal routine thing. We would pay Rs. 2

³⁵ Balwadi: preschool.

and eat it. They will not enter the bus. They would stand around with cucumbers on a plate and sell. These merchants who were selling 'coca-cola' and other drinks...

Lakshmi: Pepsi?

Sharifa: Yes, they found that their business was suffering due to these women. So one day they threatened these women and drove them out, asking them to sell outside the bus stand. They were told they had no right to come inside.

I was out of town for 15 days and when I came, I saw an old woman — I think this was the year before last, it happened in 2002. We had a very hot summer that year. An old lady was sitting looking weary. I asked her, "What happened? Why are you like this?" She said, "These rogues, they have thrown us out. We are not supposed to sell here, they say." I didn't wait to ask her any more questions. I was furious. How can they be so inhuman? How much would they be selling in a day? At the most for Rs. 40 or Rs. 50. How unjust to say that this small amount was going to affect their business! So I came rushing to office. I took out 50 visiting cards. I distributed them and asked them to go inside and see what happens. Everyone in the office was asking what was the matter. But I said nothing. I was so angry. In five minutes, the leaders, the treasurer and all the shop keeps gathered outside by 10:30a.m. I asked, "Who are you threaten the old woman?" They said, "No, madam. Please do not interfere in all this." They knew I travel by bus many times. "Why shouldn't I interfere? Do you have monopoly over buses?" I said. They said, "No, madam, you do not know these women are small traders. Thefts take place because of them. And they encourage prostitution. And we cannot accept that." I retorted, "I will give two days' time. They must sell. Otherwise you have to deal with what will happen." I don't know how I dared to say that. But I could not tolerate the injustice. But they tried to warn me. "Madam, you are respected here. See to it that it remains so." I told them I was not bothered if my name fell into disrepute.

All those women came to me. The office was filled with cucumber! The women came with baskets of them! I took all of them in a procession. I did not make any announcement I took them straight to the Collector. I spoke to the Collector. By then the police knew. They did not allow anyone inside. They allowed only 4 or 5 to accompany me. Then the Collector said, "We have not done any such thing. He phoned the Commissioner. All the women got an identity card and it got done.

Without support no one can survive. People can speak and act in whichever way regarding women. Society has given this power and sanction to men. Until the day women are given the same rights, whenever that is, until then, we have to work towards it and so we began working harder.

Lakshmi: You told me that you have some self-help programmes for women? Can you explain them?

Sharifa: With self-help as an aim many women have been brought together. Using self-help as a tool for this is indeed a good thing. But what happens is, women already work at home and there is no recognition for their work.

Lakshmi: No money either.

Sharifa: Yes, no money. And no power.

As soon as they get loan from self-help groups this again goes to pay for husband's drinking or for the daughter's marriage. So the question is how self-reliant the woman is. How much say she has in taking decisions regarding the loan remained a question. If you see, after 50 years of age most women eat even one square meal without any respect in their sons' homes. We see this happening. Then what have these self-help groups done? They boast of having done this and that but what have they done for their existence? (...)

So we said, "Okay, you take a loan or do whatever you want when you are capable. But save at least a minimum of Rs. 100 per month in your name. Do whatever you want with the rest. Put this money in fixed deposit for 5 or 10 years. So when they are 40 or 50, they will get Rs, 70000 to Rs. 80000 in hand. So we did this kind of work. For some others. We said, those who ask for a loan, should have something — land or house in her name. Otherwise the least is to buy goats or cows and use their produce — goats or cows or poultry. If we buy you 4 goats, once the goat has a calf, you can give two goats to us. It is cows they want, then it will be 4 cows. We kept the affected women here. We feed them. They get 3 square meals and live with us. We give them Rs. 100 per month to deposit in the bank. We will get them goat or cows. We will set aside some goats or cows for them, every year. So once they become capable, they take care of them.

Lakshmi: They will make a living with these goats and cows?

Sharifa: They have to. Therefore when we give self-help in an income-generation programme, the right to determine the way she wants to live, to be independent, must be given to the woman. But saying self-help groups and the women's earnings being ploughed back into the family, is no way....

Lakshmi: Since I come from an urban area, I am asking you this. How much will a woman earn with goats, cows or a hens?

Sharifa: For goats and cows, there should be a lush hillside or fertile land, that is enough. To have livestock and take care of them is not difficult. If you have 2 hens, in 6 months you will have 25 to 30 hens.

Lakshmi: Is that so?

Sharifa: Yes, if you hatch the eggs — now homestead hens cost more than Broiler hens. A kilo will be about Rs. 80 to 90. It is difficult to get eggs of homestead hens. The price today for one egg of homestead hens is Rs. 3. One egg of a broiler hen is Rs. 1.50.

Apart from working in the field and doing the household chores, by maintaining livestock, a woman takes care of her entire family. The man is supposed to be the head of the household, but in shouldering all the responsibilities, be it the house or familial responsibilities outside like attending to the auspicious and other formalities, the women play a major part.

Lakshmi: Sharifa, tell me about your work to reach out to women to inform them about social analysis? That work is among educated women isn't it? Do you conduct workshops for illiterate women also?

Sharifa: Through the women's movement and organisations or through self-help groups, we have been helped to make women come together as a group. In this we have been successful. But whenever there is a march, a struggle or any problems, the women rarely understand why they participate and what their responsibility is or why such a thing happened to a particular girl. They come because they are called or if they are with an organisation or if they feel that an injustice done to a woman must be questioned. To teach them why they should struggle, support and express their will, why they should support another woman, to know all this, to know about this society, it is necessary to know about social analysis.

Lakshmi: They should know.

Sharifa: Yes. So we not only aim at those who work in NGOs but also journalists, college teachers, village leaders and conduct trainings for them. So these trainings are not just in the form of sitting and discussing. It'll be an emotional training. To make them fully understand, we show videos, stage plays, have discussions. We ask the affected women to talk. With all this, they are able to take in a lot. Then, in village — there are two kinds of classes. One which we conduct and the other where we go where it is being conducted. And the third thing is, just as men go every year in January to Sabari Malai³⁶, likewise, we celebrate Women's Day every March. As far as I know, in the beginning, the only group that celebrated Women's Day in Pudukottai must be ours. Today we don't celebrate it here, because everyone does. From the Post Office, they would come: "Madam, you must come for Women's Day celebration this year."

Lakshmi: To give a speech, is it?

Sharifa: From government offices, from the Revenue Department, they would come saying, "Madam, today we are observing Women's Day. Let's talk about it." We would be so happy that at least they are doing something... (...)

Lakshmi: Sharifa, you have decided to build a mosque for Muslim women and it's a hot topic at the international level. Everyone is talking about you and even the B.B.C. has mentioned it. When did such a thought come to your mind? So far, you have been taking up and fighting for women in general. But for the past 2, 3 years you have been paying more attention to problems of Muslim women, isn't it? Is this idea of building a mosque for Muslim women an outcome of that?

Sharifa: I have been in this field for the past 15 years. There have been many changes since then. Women have begun to come out and speak boldly. Now even for the lesbian movement women are asking for special rights. I do not dispute that. But where there has been such progress, if there is one sector that has been grossly neglected, it is that of Muslim women.

³⁶ Sabari Malai: A place of pilgrimage, a remote shrine in southern India that draws three to four million pilgrims each year in south Indian state of Kerala.

Lakshmi: Do you think so?

Sharifa: Yes. So far, after coming to this field. I have never identified myself as a Muslim woman because I never got the space to do that. Another thing is, I am not still prepared to come out and act as openly as I speak. I was not sure whether I would last in this field. But I realised about the neglect of this sector in '95, when I did a research on the status of Muslim women and the social and economic reasons. I did research in five districts.

Lakshmi: Where was this research? In Tamilnadu?

Sharifa: No, it was sponsored by an international women's research active group. It was done by RAAG Women's Research Action Group of Bombay. It came as a chance offer to do it in Tamilnadu. Until then, I was going around in a carefree manner. In those 5 districts I had to find out about education, economical status, and their community with emphasis on their health. If you see the results, even I couldn't believe it. Could their condition be so deplorable? If you see the outcomes, one out of 5 Muslim women will have psychological problems, 1 out of 5 would be a divorcee. One out of 5 would be deserted by her husband. In one family out of every 5, there would be a widow or a girl married at a young age. One woman or the other in this kind of situation will be visible. Then I was taken aback at the research results. Another thing is, in Islam, dowry is taboo. One shouldn't lend money on interest. One shouldn't drink alcohol. There are so many rules. But what was happening had no connection with all this. They should pay 'Meher'³⁷ to the girl. They were giving Rs. 500 'Meher' and demanding Rs. 50,000 as dowry. So this too is against Islam. So why was this happening? I found that 1500 years ago, when Islam was established, the Prophet got married to a woman 35 year older than him. Certainly it would not have been for bodily attraction. It was meant to give some support. Widow remarriage is rare in other communities even now. But He did it 1500 years ago. So when Islam had such radical views on women 1500 years ago, now why do they say women have to remain indoors, observe purdah and not go outside; that they know nothing and that we should not talk about them? That even the Human Rights groups did not come forward to take up the cause of Muslim women was something I couldn't understand. So somebody had to do something in this sector and I decided it will be myself. I did not release my research work in '95 for in '92 there were riots in Bombay and the Babri Masjid³⁸ demolition. So I thought my research work might prove counter productive and the Hindus might look askance at it. I never looked for a role model. Is there anyone who works like me? Can we work together? Any Muslim girl. I had come to that state of search because no one was touching the matter. So Muslim women have to deal with Muslim women's problems. It was a question of how much I had grasped regarding this.

Sharifa: After that survey I felt I had to do something. Then I conducted a state level Seminar. Many people participated in it.

³⁷ Meher: Dowry paid by a man to the bride /family for marriage.

³⁸ Babri Masjid: A famous Muslim mosque. On December 6 1992, over a million Hindutva activists brought in by the Hindu nationalist Vishwa Hindu Parishad and BJP, razed the 16th century Muslim mosque, sparking nationwide riots between Hindus and Muslims that killed more than 2,000 people.

Lakshmi: In Pudukottai?

Sharifa: Not in Pudukottai, in Trichi.... Some famous Muslim poets, who write about Dalits, how they treat their women is a question. I was part of an incident when I was doing my research I had to interview many intellectuals. I went to the family of a well-known writer. His daughter had died a few days ago. He was aware that she had been murdered. He brought out a circular and gave it to all those who attended the funeral. He was thanking everybody who came for the funeral. "I am grateful to all those who have come to console us on my daughter's death. Let Allah forgive those who have done this to my daughter." I wondered what kind of radical poet he was. Nobody was willing to talk about this then. Now if you go see how they fare in education, it's very poor. In many places, the main entrance is for men and the back entrance is for women. And the same is true for houses too.

Lakshmi: Are you talking about houses?

Sharifa: In houses as well as in schools. Wherever Muslims are located, there will be this practice. In some towns, there are health problems because women are not allowed to go out in the daytime even for water. I will give you an instance. During menstruation, women would wash the cloth used and tuck it in a niche on the thatched roof. A woman used it not noticing a scorpion on it. She was stung. Since she was stung in her private parts she did not tell anyone. On the spot she died. There have been two such instances.

Lakshmi: Did they die?

Sharifa: They died. Even a casual study reveals such horrifying facts. A more in depth survey may reveal a condition that can make one shudder. Why has not anyone bothered to think of this sector? So why shouldn't I work among them? This thought occurred to me. After the seminar, we made some recommendations. Mainly, if others work on Islamic issues they would question you — "What do you know about this religion?" Whether I like it or not, my identity is that of a Muslim. So my questions have to be answered. In Islam, dowry is not allowed. You cannot lend money on interest. Why don't you exclude those who take dowry or lend money on high interest from the Jamaat? This was our first recommendation. If you ostracise, then there would be nobody in the Jamaat, because all are guilty. Then this Talaq³⁹ issue has to be reconsidered.

Lakshmi: These recommendations were general in nature?

Sharifa: No, we passed 10 to 12 of them in our seminar.

Lakshmi: Resolutions.

Sharifa: Yes, resolutions, we passed them in our seminar. We did not decide to place it before the government. We decided to keep them and announce them through a large women's forum. But soon after the seminar some 4 or 5 Maulvis⁴⁰ came in a car looking for us. "How can you discuss and pass such recommendations about the Jamaat?"

³⁹ Talaq: Islamic divorce practice.

⁴⁰ Maulvis: clerics.

“Who do you think you are?” I said, “I think nothing of myself. But Sir, I am as much concerned about Islam as you are. You comment that if women behave in a particular way, it is anti-Islam. Similarly, I also have the right to talk about Muslim men.

Then I held a conference after that. We asked the girls to speak at the conference. In these 15 years, I have made many girls talk. But there was a great difference between what those women spoke and what these women expressed. These women only needed the space to speak. When they opened up, it was unbelievable.

Lakshmi: They spoke their hearts out?

Sharifa: Yes, from their hearts. They spoke about sexual rights.

Sharifa: The women were asking if they didn't have desires. At that time Shabana Azmi⁴¹ shaved off her head for the film 'Water'. Shabana Azmi shaved off her head and that caused a lot of commotion. And here, because she was beautiful her husband had tonsured her. If you look into each incident the lives of these women are so different. These women get talaq, notices through email, by post and over the phone. Divorce notices. After divorce, the idda... In a particular case, a woman's father came running for help. He had given a petition for harassment of his daughter. She had to go to the police station the next day. But his son-in-law had sent a divorce notice. So the father comes running with that to us. If I open this, my daughter has to observe Idda. Should she go to the police station or not?" See how tricky these issues are. You give women minimum rights which are there in Islam or at least look at it from a humanitarian angle," we pleaded with them.

Lakshmi: Even after talaq you have to observe Idda, is it?

Sharifa: Yes, both in the case of talaq and death of a husband, a woman must observe Idda. Generally for her mind, her body and everything else is under the control of others. She has no power. Women'll be begging outside the dargah⁴². They'd only worry if they are begging with or without purdah. Nobody is bothered about their begging itself. If you see the way they live, there are basic problems. There are so many issues. So there was a need to discuss about this sector. So while discussing in all the districts about this the problems began increasing day by day. So why can't women be in the Jamaat. Jamaat is a body that takes decisions on all that is happening in our society, be it good or bad. They will sit in the mosque and discuss. So if there is some issue involving a woman they will sit and talk about it in the mosque. Now the husband will come and give his side of the matter. But the woman cannot go there because women are not allowed inside mosques. So on one's behalf, on behalf of the woman, her father or her brother will represent her. They can only ask if the woman was fed and clothed properly. They will not

⁴¹ Shabana Azmi is a famous Indian actress. "Water" is part of a trilogy of films (Fire and Earth being the other two) by director Deepa Mehta.

⁴² In the Indian subcontinent, dargahs are often the site of festivals held in honor of the deceased saint at the date of his Urs, which is a day dedicated to the saint which is usually but not exclusively the saint's death anniversary. The shrine is illuminated with candles or strings of electric lights. There may be parades and processions, performances of religious music, and fairs with food stalls and fun rides.

be able to talk about her feelings and her life. That is not the place to talk about all that. A judgement is passed without her consent. This is not acceptable to evolving Muslim women like us. So we said, “When you discuss things in the Jamaat, let there be two women representatives at least. Even if you say that we should wear ten purdahs to be there, we will agree. We’ll wear purdah and come there. But when you are talking about us, we will be present.” This was one of our recommendations. Likewise, during marriages, there should be one woman witness. If there are two male witnesses, then there should be at least one female witness. Normally what happens is, near Nagoor and Madurai there is a dargah. People will go to the dargah and get married a second time. We questioned that. We also insisted that medical test should be conducted for both men and the women, specially for the man before the marriage. We made such recommendations. When we discussed these issues and made women speak it out, it dawned on us that there was no special place where women could sit and discuss these issues. But then isn’t a mosque like a community centre? It is not just a place where prayers are held. Everything is discussed there isn’t it? So then, by the same rule, we should be able to talk about our problems. We are half the population. But we aren’t counted. I began to speak about this amongst women. It had a great impact. Is our relationship with a mosque only as Janasa? Janasa means a dead body. ‘So only the Janasa, the dead body goes in. I don’t go in’ I created this feeling in the minds of those women. In the conference, there were about 600-1000 women, and I could sense their anger and passion. The conference began with tears and moved to anger and disgust. So, we don’t have to be quiet anymore. So what we did was from each district we chose two women. There are women representatives from 10 districts.

Lakshmi: 20 women?

Sharifa: No, not 20 women, more than that. In 10 districts, there are almost 10 to 15 groups. We organised a Muslim Women’s Group. We select two women from each district for the group “Come and sit and talk. What is the Jamaat? It is where four people come and meet.”

Lakshmi: That means you don’t look upon the mosque just as a place of worship?

Sharifa: No, it is not place of worship alone. Now, you see a 60 year old man will sleep in a mosque or in a temple. Where will a woman go to stretch go to herself, just to relax? To talk about oneself, to do things such a place is necessary. So the mosque will have space for worship, it will also be a place where the good and bad in women’s life can be discussed and decisions taken. To discuss income generation, their problems — the problems of women whose lives are affected — and education of their girls. It should be overall a community center. Definitely to pray. They will also pray along with the Jamaat. So I suggested that there is a need for space for women to pray and that a mosque is needed. I suggested it and the women proposed it.

Lakshmi: All the women?

Sharifa: All the women proposed it and there is no other alternative. Now I have to build it.

Lakshmi: What was the reaction to that?

Sharifa: Both opposition and support. When we discuss this, at times some good-natured men too would join. So one Muthalippu said, “I will give you land to build a mosque” Then he went and spoke at his village. I do not know what he spoke but he must have said, “They are going to do things for women. It will be all to the good of women of our town.” Then their Jamaat invited us, they said, “We have space in the mosque area here. And we can give you a 10 cents more. You can build your mosque here. We will give you space.” We replied, “This is no ordinary matter. You will receive world-wide praise but there will also be....

Lakshmi: Opposition too...

Sharifa: Who would oppose us, they said. They tore a page from a notebook. Took signatures immediately and gave it to us. But I knew this was not going to succeed. We spoke about everything to a reporter. What they did was to publish a report entitled, “We want to relax.” Within three days, that Parambur village became a historical place. All the Islamic magazines and big shots asked them, “On what basis did you give this place to these women?” You see, from Pudukottai, even if an Imam goes there, it is big news in that place. When from Delhi and Madras people came they felt they had done a sinful act and they totally...

Lakshmi: They withdrew the offer.

Sharifa: They withdrew. Then we began thinking. Initially we were thinking of building only a mosque. But suppose there are 50 women with us. They may want to come to STEPS to discuss about women. If get thrown out of their homes for that, it is our responsibility and duty to take care of them. That is, what we do must take them into account. So we are waiting to buy the land ourselves and build a structure on it.

From each district we have representatives and we are forming a Women’s Jamaat of all our representatives. A State level Jamaat called ‘Tamilnadu Women’s Jamaat’ Committee. This Women’s Jamaat committee will meet once a month. In whichever police station. Jamaat or wherever a woman’s petition is rejected and justice denied to her, the Jamaat will meet at that place and discuss.

Lakshmi: Will you have a woman priest in your mosque?

Sharifa: Definitely. People comment about me — what does she know about Islam? After all I’ve studied in a Muslim University. Even then they comment. Okay let it be that I do not know. But give me what I know. If I ask so much without knowing much about Islam, just imagine how much I would demand if I knew it well? I would ask for my rights, isn’t it? So my part is to have proper people for everything. STEPS is taking it ahead. And then when the full structure is completed, I will hand it over to those women and withdraw myself. I am preparing myself to be strengthened until that part of it is over.(...)

I’ve become accustomed to all sorts of oppositions. I have become an experienced hand at dealing with it. At the most, they will try to smear my character. I am now used to that. Second is my life. Maybe instead of dying tomorrow, I will die today. That’s all. I know I am not going to live for a hundred years. But I want to live until this mosque gets completed. I am selfish about

that. Once my task is over and my mosque is finally built, let anyone kill me. That's what I feel. Now you look at the next generation, women maybe educated and have jobs, and can progress in life. But this attitude, this way of viewing women, that'll never change. To change that is our responsibility. So if we create this space for women, the next generation will take care of it. To achieve that we have to strain ourselves in every way. I have got into this with that kind of compulsion. (...)

Lakshmi: Sharifa, you went to Gujarat⁴³ in 2002 after the communal riots. What was your experience? What do you think women should do to bring about communal harmony?

Sharifa: In Gujarat — In '92 after the masjid demolition in Ayodhya⁴⁴, I got letters from friends saying the situation was like this and I should watch out. I could not understand anything. Why are they saying so? There is nothing serious. Why do they say so? The Masjid has been demolished. So whether a masjid is built there or a temple, what does it matter? Let them build a school there. Why do these two communities clash? Then I raised a question, "After the masjid was razed down, you spoke at length about minority rights. But about the rape of so many women why didn't any organisation speak?" That was my question. But before this Gujarat issue we had held a Human Rights Workshop. Soon after the Gujarat riots. Then Balagopal of Andhra, a Human Right Activist, he told us. But we could not believe what he said. Even then we thought, 'Let us go and see. We will go and show our solidarity.' But it was only after we went there that we found out that even a very cruel, sadist person, after a visit to Gujarat will come back destroyed. We returned feeling that way. Such a horrible... When we entered Gujarat, in Ahmedabad⁴⁵ we could make out nothing. We asked them where the riots took place. "Oh! You go to the refugee camp. Go and see there." And that hurt me. In my own country what is a refugee camp? A refugee camp is a place where outsiders come and seek refuge. Those words alienating me from my own country — that shattered us completely.

Secondly, when we went there and saw those women, what I felt was — kill a person if you want to. 'You are not needed, you die. You are Muslims; our country would benefit only if you die' — we'll willingly die. But killing in such a cruel manner, in such a despicable way, nothing can be as bad. If you say gender-equality can be brought about only after such acts, I would want none of it. To chop off their breasts... the words of those women... I can't ... and secondly, they are staying in a refugee camp; a refugee camp situated in a burial ground. \ Women are restricted and made to sit at home. But these women were sitting in the burial ground.

They're sitting there and cooking. And what was even more heart rending was, inspite of all the horrors, we were able to listen to them and bear it; and that on a stone stove, they made tea and offered us. Such a community was considered unnecessary for the country, considered traitors, asked to leave. What can we say when from a small child to an adult mete out this cruelty? And what was even more difficult to accept was that the State played a main role in all this mayhem.

After I returned — I have been working for the past 15 years here. But regarding a woman in distress, I never asked whether she was a Muslim or a Hindu. Then the other question that came

⁴³ Gujarat: Indian state located in western India, bordered by Pakistan to the northwest.

⁴⁴ Ayodhya: Ancient city in India location of Babri Masjid (see footnote 41 above).

⁴⁵ Ahmedabad: The largest city in the state of Gujarat.

to my mind was why, in such a terrible situation, no Human Rights organisations raised any question about it. Why was there no struggle? No one said, so many women've been killed; we want to protest against it. Nobody observed even a day's fast. It troubled me a lot and I felt very insecure after I returned. Two of my friends had come to see me in Pudukottai. I spoke about all this, what had happened and so on. When I was speaking, a third person came along. Unconsciously, I lowered my voice. Why? Usually, when something happens, I would be screaming Why can't I speak aloud now? Why did my voice go down when another person came? I was talking about atrocities committed then why did I lower my voice? That set me thinking. If we, who call ourselves and are recognised as Human Rights Activists and feminists feel this way, how'd an ordinary Muslim feel? We have to think of that. (...)

If you look at religion itself — I don't choose to be born in this family, or religion. Whatever the religion. So if I reach a particular age they should ask me, "You are born in this family. Do you want to be a follower of this religion or live a secular life?" such a question should be asked. But the space for that — a society which grudges giving the smallest right to woman, it will take ages before such a question is put to a girl. But this question should be raised. I feel that dialogue about such a question must be there. (...)

Lakshmi: Sharifa, would you call yourself a feminist? In your opinion, what is feminism?

Sharifa: I have never said in so many words that I am a feminist. But my action is informed by feminist thinking, I feel. A girl must consider her self-respect, her mind, her thoughts, and decisions to live her own life, as her responsibility. Likewise, her life and all happenings are within the framework of this society. 'I have the right to all the privileges and recognition accorded in the society. I have to demand it.' That feeling should be there. Another thing is, when a woman realizes the status given to her by her family, her religion and her society, there is no stopping that woman. Only then, you can say that she is emerging with true feminist thinking.

So things like this — that women must receive genuine social recognition, there should be possibilities for this message to reach all women and be absorbed.

Every girl should be able to determine the way, she wants to live, saying, "My life. I must live it." Once this reaches home, I believe that the work and thoughts of feminists and their action will be genuine and fully evolved.

(...)

Lakshmi: Sharifa, in the life you have chosen to lead, how much space is there for things like friendship and marriage?

Sharifa: Marriage and friendship... in the life I led... when I came out of this community— I got a new life. I wanted to keep the gains of meeting women and talking to them. I thought of nothing but this.

When it comes to marriage, there is a need for a good companion. If I choose a good companion, I can do it only through marriage because there are so many women who come to seek my help and their lives should not be affected. I have already told in an interview. The minimum I expect

is a man who understands my life and me well. I have no other demands. Someone acceptable. Life must run smooth. If I get companion like that, I will not resist. I have already crossed many barriers. Now if I choose a life I don't have to ask my mother or my elder sister for their approval. Even if they object, I don't have to worry. I will not feel upset that I have defied them. I have gone past that stage.

Lakshmi: You said that you were very fond of plants since childhood.

Sharifa: Yes.

Lakshmi: Is it because of that love that you built this house?

Sharifa: Since childhood I have been fond of village life. When I used to study in school, these girls would come with lots of flowers on their hair. My house was close to my school. They would open their tiffin boxes and keep the food in the lid and eat and I would be tempted. So I would go home, take a tiffin box and eat like them. That life — and those flowers in their hair — as I grew up, I had a longing to live in a village and come to town for work. I was enamoured of rural life. I would exchange my idli for millet rice. That life... to live in a village... I used to long for a life partner who hailed from a village. I used to think that my life would be happy this way.

Lakshmi: Do you have any intention of building a mosque here?

Sharifa: We are looking for a plot. We are short of funds. If I do not get any place elsewhere, I have decided to build it here, because who will manage this place after me? I will leave it to these women. So long as I am there... generally our experience has been... either there is attack on character or life. Regarding character, I have crossed that bridge so many times that I am used to it. Then the question of life. Instead of tomorrow, I may die today. One is scared of only these two things in life. When one is not bothered about both, what is there to think?