

Sri Lanka: Women, activism and intimacy

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Over the past several years, I have met and interviewed a number of political activists, both male and female, trying to understand how and why they came to do what they do, what made them often go against the grain, and take unpopular positions, sometimes at considerable personal risk and sacrifice.

One thing that became very evident to me quite soon was that activism – was deeply embedded in intimate relationships. Relationships both enabled and constrained activism and the intimacy of interactions with comrades and family (and often these two overlapped) was a theme that came up frequently, especially in the narratives of the women activists with whom I spoke.

Politics was also filled with emotions and feelings – not only shrill, loud angry debates and differences that we associate with politics, but expressive of the full range of emotions of which humans are capable.

While listening to these activists and the more I learned about their lives, I began to understand better the well-known feminist slogan, the personal is the political. But then I also realised that conventional ideas about what constitutes political and activism, often exclude intimacy and emotions. Consequently, there is a range and diversity in activism, especially women's contribution in politics and activism that is not recognised as 'political'.

Defining activism

This got me thinking about how we define activism, how we recognise an activist and also what we think of as political. When we think of activism, activists and politics, we usually think of power and powerful people; of grand acts of bravery, sacrifice and even violence; of people who get sent to prison or who are martyred for their actions, the people who dominate the headlines and the evening news. We usually do not think in terms of the small, everyday acts that are equally important for sustaining and taking forward movements and transforming societies.

When I talked to activists, their narratives were full of memories and reminisces that were rich in detail about feelings, emotions and the intensity of relationships that both sustained and constrained what they did. I heard many stories: what it feels like to be living underground and hiding in the bathroom in a friend's house for weeks and what this meant for the rest of the household and how they lived their lives. That even in the most frightening of circumstances, there was still laughter, love and happiness as well as jealousy, rivalry and bitterness.

I was told about the many emotions that go through your mind when you are arrested along with your comrades and you are taken out one by one for questioning that inevitably involves severe beating and you have to discuss what can be revealed to your interrogators and what you cannot. I heard about the inner conflicts that take place when you are trying to maintain distinctions between friend and enemy – for instance, when your prison guard presents you with a kitten for company while you are being kept in solitary confinement.

Politics and activism

Popular ideas of politics and activism define politics as something to do with the public sphere and public life. We separate the big picture and the big actors from the details, the quotidian and the small gestures.

Politics and activism is supposed to be about rational action, driven by interests and goals, differentiating between the friend and the enemy, and ideological stances. Even when we write about political actors, we focus on leaders, we focus on their charisma, large personalities and their egos – individuals, not relationships. The stuff of emotions and relationships are supposed to lie in the domain of the irrational and politics is supposed to be about the rational – about actions driven by goals and interests. Emotions and politics are not supposed to go together unless it is for instrumental reasons.

This conceptualisation of politics remains quite dominant, even though feminist and queer politics for example, or movements for civil rights, anti-slavery movements, etc. have questioned this separation between the personal and the political. But the idea that politics is about rational action in the public sphere carried out largely by men, is still quite dominant.

Far more complicated

A closer scrutiny of women's lives reveals a far more complicated and diverse picture. Women's participation in political and social activism has taken many forms and shapes. But it is also evident that women faced many complex challenges. Many of those involved negotiating and managing multiple roles and relationships.

For many activists there was no separation between their public and private lives, neither did they have a choice about it. They were constantly juggling multiple tasks and activities. Many women turned to other women for support to be able to do this. Sometimes it was through networks of close friendships and support and sometimes it was by hiring other women to do that work.

Even apart from support for the work, most activists that I spoke with discussed relationships when describing the work that they did. They spoke about friendships that led them to the kind of work they did; people who had inspired and mentored them; networks of support that helped them survive difficult periods in their lives; how disruptions and breakdowns in relationships affected their work; and how decisions they took affected relationships. Sometimes, crucial political decisions – which group to join, choices about leaving movements, parties, although seemingly ideological, were also deeply embedded in and influenced by relationships.

These friendships and social networks were crucial in supporting the activism of both women and men. Most activists became involved in politics because of a friend – sometimes, accompanying a friend to a meeting or discussion became the start of a life dedicated to activism. Or having a friend whose house you could stay in or encourage you, gave women the confidence to travel, to participate, and to engage. Comrades were often not simply political comrades – they were family as well. This was why betrayal or the breakdown of relationships often turned very bitter and violent.

Interpersonal relationships, ties of intimacy, emotions and friendship significantly influenced the trajectory of political and social movements and the lives of activists.

Yet what is usually recognised as emotion and friendship in politics and activism is one that is quite limited and narrow in its definition and meaning. It usually leaves out a range of emotions and social relationships that are quite important in politics and activism. Firstly, it conceives of emotions in an instrumental sense – there is a utility or value that is conferred to emotion in protest, activism, and

politics.

Emotions for example are generally understood in terms of its importance in mobilising resources around common interests or grievances or for understanding collective behaviour. Feelings of anger, frustration, and injustice are mobilised to organise collective protests.

Secondly, there are certain exclusions and repressions in how emotions and friendships are perceived in politics. Emotions are opposed to cognition, irrational to rational, mind to body, private with the public and so on.

Since emotions are conceived as irrational, they can only be given meaning or importance when it can be understood as useful (utilitarian value), or when it can be analysed in terms of influencing 'deviant' collective behaviour such as riots or mob-violence. Politics and activism are supposed to lie in the rational and the public realms: everything else is designated to be in the realm of the irrational and the private. In other words, anything to do with emotions in politics is either utilitarian or deviant - it lies in the periphery of what we understand to be political.

But this neglects the role of emotions in interpersonal relations - and suppresses the centrality of interpersonal relations for social and political movements and activism. It also limits the concern with emotions only to certain types of emotions and not the full range of emotions that are experienced by humans.

For example, although we may study rage and hate in mobilising mob violence, we are unable to see that even the most bureaucratic, professional or disciplined of movements and demeanours also requires the cultivation of a certain type of emotions - such as that of disinterestedness and objectivity.

Apart from strong emotions that are necessary for political and social mobilisation, there is also the 'emotional work' that goes into sustaining ties of intimacy in everyday interactions, the emotional work that maintain networks and relationships that are necessary for persuading people to engage in resistance, desistance, to persuade them to accept or condone decisions and policies.

Broadening our understanding

Acknowledging the centrality of interpersonal relationships, emotion, and intimacy in politics and activism is not simply about the equal sharing of tasks and positions in politics - but rather broadening our understanding of politics and activism to be more inclusive and to recognise the full range of activities and work that goes into being political.

It is to challenge the idea of 'big' and 'small' politics as if there are certain political positions, battles and issues - such as gender politics, minority politics for example, that are less relevant, less important, less urgent. It is to question the notion that politics is only about 'big' people and struggles for power between nations, states, institutions and political parties. It is also about recognising and paying attention to the importance of nurturing and sustaining relationships, emotions and intimacy in political work.

By pushing these aspects of politics to the periphery, we exclude many from politics and activism. That exclusion has meant that only a particular type of politics, and a type of politics that is quite toxic and violent and has proven to fail us over and over again, is present in our world.

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