

Count Me In! Conference 16-18 April 2011, Kathmandu, Nepal

Day 3 – April 18

Arundhati Roy in conversation with Shohini Ghosh held the audience totally mesmerised at the opening session of Day 3 of Count me In! She discussed her childhood, her relationship with the iconic Mary Roy, her mother, and her struggles with the Indian government, with candour and humour. She pointed out that many of the current policies disempower and alienate millions of the poorest and most vulnerable in the country and explained how and why she chooses her particular battles. Participants were inspired by her vision of social justice and her willingness to be an object of vilification in India- Roy has no problem being ‘hated’ by certain constituencies. Her detractors are incidental, those who love her, are those on whose behalf she speaks, “finding beauty in the saddest places and honing it into a weapon of war”. As Shohini Ghosh pointed out towards the end of the conversation, Roy plants ideas in your head “which you can’t unthink now” and indeed why would you want to?

Roy is not an easy act to follow but excellent breakaway sessions kept participants energised as they divided up to learn about and strategise on many different issues including new forms of media being used for activism and social change; research on violence against marginalised women in south Asia; sexual rights and the women’s movement; and the politics of advocacy and service provision.

The brilliant GIMP project from New York (a mixed group of able bodied and disabled dancers) kept people awake after lunch. GIMP performed an extract from their show, which examines the uncompromising ways we are often identified or defined by our physicality. The dancers followed this with a question and answer session that gave participants very interesting insights into the ways in which the body can be challenged. As one dancer pointed out, sometimes disability is a hidden thing, not so obvious to see. The question is not so much what limits us but rather what pushes us forward- and the personal reasons why individuals choose to push themselves in various ways, the joy, liberation and sense of control that it gives them.

Three days of new ideas, new alliances, new strategies and new hope drew to a close to the resounding music and dance of the Sahodari Foundation’s trans choir. Participants were left reflecting on the many questions that had arisen about the nature of counting and exclusion, the strategies discussed, knowledge gleaned and inspiration provided, the solidarity and support developed between individuals and groups from different countries and the possibilities and opportunities that lie ahead. The conference ends. Count me In!, the idea, the concept, the programme continues.