

Boast Bitch Collective, International

Could you introduce your collective and tell us a bit about it?

Boast Bitch Collective came together around five years ago as we were hired by an INGO to create a campaign dedicated to ending gender-based violence which is how those within the collective met. We are based internationally which became a strength for us, and we saw the team as a collective even within the INGO we worked for. We didn't want to work in the same system and structure as the INGO we worked for but with the people who are at the forefront of change, it is also a space for self and collective care outside of a corporate environment.

What are the challenges posed by your context and the broader societal structures and system in which you are located?

Feminist work isn't often financed or supported, and we recognised that our work must centre feminist movements and be part of movement building, however resources are often not given to the movements. Investment is only there when it sells a good story, and everyone wants to be seen and heard for what they're doing.

The question of how we can work within pre-set hierarchal structures was also a challenge for us. Feminism is often used loosely in INGOs and corporate spaces and finding those who share a collective feminist vision of working can be a challenge. The structure and culture that we were in reflected brutal individualism; being cis, male, white, European, or North American gets you ahead in that system, not in a system that favoured collective ways of working. The way people got ahead is by being ruthless and taking others down so you can get ahead first and using your personal privileges to do that. It is not about making space for others. This is not just the case for this INGO but a broad problem within the sector and this proved to be a huge challenge once we began to form our collective within this space.

What does practicing collective feminist leadership mean within your context?

Initially some of us felt concerns about the word leadership as it is usually viewed as conventional individualistic leadership. Within our collective we aimed to transform this meaning and practice a form of leadership where accountability and responsibility are shared equally among. We wanted to establish a culture of not working 'for' someone but working 'with' someone. For us it is about collective decision making and about how we want to be structured whilst also understanding each other's strengths and interests and making space to be able to harness that and nurture it in a way that is fair and in a way that is not overburdening.

We are a team of seven and we function well and efficiently and have a linear relationship with each other and can hold each other accountable and challenge each other – this for us is feminist leadership.

The collective aspect within the INGO wasn't held up by context around us, we were not praised for practicing this. However, there was a feeling of trust and respect which grew organically and stemmed from a deep listening from everyone around us and the kinds of debates that were happening within the team. We brought ourselves more in the space than anyone expected us to. We did not work by ourselves but recognised that having inputs from each other would strengthen our work. The need to practice collective leadership also stemmed from the fact that we felt alone in our work and struggles within the INGO. It progressed naturally. We made sure that we met often and build a space with each other, all from different contexts and understanding the nuances in our different contexts.

We also asked ourselves: 'how did we come to this?' We did not come with a big strategy or process, but the practice came from deep respect and humility and recognising that 'I should not have power over you, it should be a power within, a collective power which comes from deep respect as people and feminists.' There was also a lack of respect towards collective leadership and collective decision making in the broader organisation, what was valued is hierarchical processes and a top-down approach. This caused a clash of values and made the need for a collective transformative practice more important than ever.

How have we tried to transform power?

As it can often be assumed that power exists within hierarchies and formal titles that people hold, especially within the INGO and corporate contexts, we recognised and aimed to transform the difference in power we held. For example, Bethan was our boss within our team and held that power institutionally speaking, but the way we practiced and worked transformed this so that power was shared; other members of the team felt the same accountability and responsibility for their work as a "boss" would. This involves demanding accountability from each other. This process also involves reflecting on our own personal norms and was a reflective process over time. We also reflected on our division of work so that we all had a say in what we were producing and came from a place of respect; that we are of equal worth and power despite our qualifications and title.

Within the INGO context there is a very neoliberal capitalist way of looking at labour: 'you are here to do your job and you're here to get that job done' and competition supports these ideologies. We all cared deeply about the outcome of the work being done and wanted to therefore change this. Dismantling hierarchy in this way does not mean no structure however, rather that leadership is shared and rotated.

How do you practice self and collective care?

When working alone or even in team in the INGO we worked for, we were afraid to say "I don't know" or to ask for help because they assume you know everything and there was lots of pressure to feel productive in the formal work sense. We aimed to transform this by practicing collective care - when someone steps out, we divide up the responsibilities.

We held debriefing sessions often and tried to recognise each other's energy levels and stepping in for each other when needed. We had an incident within the INGO about negotiating pay and this involved standing up to the politics of equity. We all stood up together. This for us was a process of radical healing and we asked ourselves: 'how do you respond to trauma as a collective?' We all practiced honesty; we did not have to show up to work at our best if we were not feeling our best.

We also practice collective care by being deeply committed to our core values and work and ending gender-based violence. There was an incident of sexual violence within the organisation to women based in Haiti. We recognise that the personal is political and we don't just work on ending violence and go home. We practiced collective responsibility and care to support each other with this trauma and kept pushing for accountability to hold those responsible to account.

What are the key learnings and experiences you would share for others who want to advance collective leadership?

- Don't be hard on yourself – structure not upheld to support co-leadership model – it is a trial-and-error process
- Feminist leadership can often become a buzz word, recognise the difference between being a leader and being accountable to each other. It's not about identifying personality traits in individual people; it's not about doing x, y and z and then saying 'yes you are now a feminist leader.' An individual person cannot display the traits of a feminist leader because we all have our drawbacks, vulnerabilities - we all sometimes need to step back. It is about how you come together and become a powerful collective of feminists and bringing this space and these ideas to others.
- Accountability and leadership can be mixed up with each other. Just because someone is higher in the hierarchy does not mean they are more accountable – they are all accountable within their roles in the structure and equally responsible for creating a feminist space
- Check yourself, check your privilege and question yourself about your actions and decisions - why you want something, why you want to do something and analysing that
- Removing hierarchy and bringing structure; a flatter structure with responsibility, accountability, and roles. Finding ways to subvert organisational dynamics – e.g., what does paid equity mean to workers?
- You cannot face systemic issues alone; you need community and support. The system leads you to believe you are the only one and being together and practicing it in a collective way is essential

Urgent Action Fund for Women's Human Rights Asia and the Pacific

Just as different plants in a garden add to its beauty and utility, we valued diversity. However, ensuring all plants thrive with similar care and nourishment remains a big challenge. We realised that diversity also meant lack of a shared understanding and language on our political work to collectively respond to the increasing vulnerabilities of women and non-binary activists we engage with. Forging a collective consciousness and culture needs intentional work to be done. Apart from discussing work priorities, deliverables and deadlines, we recognise the need to respectfully confront the discomfort of our differences, interrogate how we exercise power within the organisation, and be open to learn from each other with generosity of spirit.

Recently, we faced together a turning point in UAF A&P's organisational life. A former team member raised issues about the organisation, and how she was treated. Viri opened a collective space for team members to reflect about "the emotional aspect of our work, and talk about our issues in a way we have not done before". Jane facilitated the conversation, as we realised creating a safe space to accommodate each other's vulnerabilities is essential, and on-going organisational reflexive spaces and processes are critical to work through differences and difficult issues to foster a feminist organisational culture where accountability is rooted in a balance between individual care, and collective care and accountability of the organisation.

View their full page here: <https://uafanp.medium.com/growing-uaf-a-p-the-rhythms-of-coordinated-gardeners-cc8b93e6556>



PRADAN, India

Indian poverty is diverse, complex and large with interplay of many factors—economic (market forces), political (influence over decision making at various stages), ecological (e.g., erratic monsoons), social (e.g., exclusion based on caste, class, gender, religion) and psychological (e.g., people's agency or confidence to make change happen). It remains acute, large and stubborn even in the face of huge public spending and a growing economy. This is even more evident in endemic poverty regions, where governance is weak, state machinery impaired and communities disenfranchised. In the recent past in spite of significant economic growth the gap between rich and poor, violence against women, ecological imbalance, etc. has simultaneously increased manifolds making the society at large more unjust and inequitable.

There are multiple perspectives on poverty and its drivers. The classical view is that poverty is essentially a material or economic condition, caused by past economic circumstance—lack of assets, income sources, access to services, infrastructure, access to technology, etc. An alternative perspective draws on the notion of power: that the unequal distribution of power in society is the key driver of poverty, where Power is a function of one's capability, context and influence, i.e. Person, Place and Position. The phenomenon of mass rural poverty therefore may be seen as a dynamic consequence of the interplay of forces which result from the interaction between people (individuals, groups and communities), institutions of society (social, political and economic) and the natural resources.

Removing rural poverty thus involves action to stimulate/facilitate change in the constituents and their interaction. It is important to focus on and stimulate an altering of the self-image or sense of self-worth of the 'people'. This needs to be supported by simultaneously working for change and improvement in the 'environment' that poor people find themselves in. Change is therefore a transformative process aimed at altering the dynamic of interaction as well as nature of the constituents themselves.

PRADAN¹ was founded in 1983, with a belief that people must bring about a transformative process of change, 'Creating a Just and Equal Society'. As women are at the bottom of the intersection of caste, class and gender, PRADAN helps women and their collectives to enhance their understanding on socio-political and economic issues, identify factors/ reasons for this state in a specific context, prepare plan and act accordingly. PRADAN facilitates these women's collectives to increasingly be the drivers of change in their area. It envisions these collectives' led actions on livelihoods, addressing gender inequities and participatory governance, improving access to education and health services; and nutrition to women, would lead women to take charge and usher in a holistic change of their villages and communities. PRADAN's goals are:

- Reaching out to the poorest communities, building human capabilities, building women's self-reliant collectives as change agents
- Reducing hunger, ensuring year-round food
- Making the most of nature's gifts through husbandry, suitable technologies and investments
- Building models of alternative livelihoods, training the community in new skill sets
- Linking to markets, to financial institutions, and to government
- Making the community aware of its rights, empowering them to have a say in the way things are run

PRADAN, with its participatory culture as one of its non-negotiables (details in Annexure 1), has evolved democratic and egalitarian structure (organisation structure in Annexure 2), systems and processes for decision making around articulating development task, planning, reviewing and also identifying people for different leadership positions as well as continuity in such positions. Overall, decision making in PRADAN is bottom up.

A lot of emphasis is given to collective leadership, where the most strategic management body is called Management Unit (MU), the regional (in our context we call it Development Cluster²) management group is called Development Cluster Management Committee (DCMC) where decision at development cluster level is taken. At the frontline, a team of 5-6 professionals supported by other staff orchestrates team's agenda in interaction with the communities.

As a reflective organisation PRADAN holds an 'Annual Retreat' of all professionals including the trainees (called Development Apprentices). It is a place for individual and collective reflection to understand what went well and what did not during the past year, and rejuvenate to usher into the new year for bringing greater impact. The event has been there from the initial years of PRADAN and some of the Retreats have significantly contributed in rearticulating the organisation's mission, vision and approach of engagement apart from nurturing internal climate.

Growth and development are on-going processes in one's life. They are like streams flowing beneath the course of life, guiding one's journey. Sometimes, one is aware of these processes; sometimes, not. Taking charge of one's life involves an awareness of her/his choices, an understanding of the internal forces and dynamics that stimulate those choices, and an ability to exercise them. Reflecting on experiences and the significance these have in one's lives sharpens the awareness of the choices before someone. There are various components like village stay, village study and modules on livelihood, gender, village society and economy, orientation to self-help-groups, and development perspectives offered at different points, during apprenticeship, helps in making this career choice.

A major component of the DA program is for the Apprentices to have a 'field guide' who is a constant point of reference and co-traveller with them. Apprentices discuss all their dilemmas and reflections with their field guide, observe and learn how the guide is engaging with the community and working on different projects, and do joint experimentation with the field guide. The field guides have to go through a three-phase field guides' development program³ which equip them to guide the newcomers. Robert Carkhuff's⁴ model of personal counselling has been a key framework in our training and practice of guiding. PRADAN in its efforts to 'Make PRADAN a better place for Women to Work' has many initiatives like Women Caucus, Gender Audit of work places, Men Champions and Gender Modules for Apprentices. All of these is spearheaded by a steering group which has members from field, different unit as well as the Executive Director.

In the recent times, at the onset of pandemic, and the concomitant isolation, fear, devastation and death, which almost everyone has experienced at close quarters, has shaken the very core and meaning of our existence. The uncertainty as to who and in what form will this virus inflict any one of us, has plunged many of us into depths of concern and depression perhaps never experienced in our collective consciousness.

A series of mental health awareness workshops (about an hour-and-a-half each) is being organized to expose all colleagues to the canvas of mental health, and address concerns that the participants may have. These workshops may culminate in ideas and approaches that could be adopted to deal with issues of mental health at the workplace, the family and society at large. The intention is to nurture a climate of awareness and understanding across the organisation and to pay attention to the mental health of self and others around us.

Last but not the least there has been challenges while trying to practice collective feminist leadership. Democracy and democratic functioning is often the casualty in our society. Norms and practices upholding the values of equality, equity and fairness need regular attention and reinforcement, to establish democratic functioning as a way of life. Facilitating groups to examine, explore, reinforce and adopt processes and practices of democratic functioning such as distributive leadership, consensual decision-making, etc., are critical. These ensure that collectives, groups and people in the community are able to experience freedom to exercise their rights and choices and bring about change in their self-view.

Some key insights/learnings are also there trying to advance collective feminist leadership. They are:

- The systems, structures and processes need alignment, without that it is difficult to uphold the spirit of collective feministic leadership
- It is important to have a value based organization, an organisation with 'A Soul' than only performance based. If one keeps the core value of valuing people, people will perform. And that will be more than what one would expect with lots of performance monitoring.
- The more you trust in your people, the more they take ownership, be responsible and accountable. For all these to happen one has to lead with grit and grace.
- Democracy has to be learned anew in each generation...there is always pull and push towards autocracy.
- Servant leadership. Group is above individual. Any consensual group decision is much powerful and effective than individual decision.



Network of Women in Media, India

The Network of Women in Media, India (NWMI) is a 20-year-old collective that serves as a forum for women in media professions to share information and resources, exchange ideas, promote media awareness and ethics, and work for gender equality and justice within the media and society. It has gradually emerged as a space known to provide solidarity and support to women journalists, including freelancers/independent journalists, whose work is often solitary and whose concerns are rarely addressed by other media organisations. The NWMI is an inclusive community that welcomes as members women (and those who identify as women or gender fluid) working in or on the media (media professionals/practitioners, media scholars/researchers, media faculty/students). There are no selection criteria or processes; any woman who belongs to one or more of the above categories and wishes to join the network is added to the email list, the primary platform for interaction at the national level, and can choose to join other network groups, particularly on social media.

The network recognises and celebrates the achievements of fellow members, while also offering solidarity and support to colleagues facing various obstacles and injustices in the course of work. A major area of focus has been the precarious situation of independent/freelance journalists; details of initiatives in this area are available [here](#). The network has also launched several other initiatives, such as the NWMI Fellowship, the Letdown in Lockdown series (in response to the widespread loss of jobs and incomes in the wake of the Covid pandemic), the “In Memoriam” listing to record and mourn the Covid-related deaths of journalists and media workers, the Journalists for Afghanistan fund-raiser, and the Gender, Media and Elections blog, in addition to a number of surveys and publications.

The NWMI is a 100% not-for-profit organisation – a voluntary, informal, decentralised, non-hierarchical collective with no institutional affiliation, secretariat, office-bearers or paid staff. It is entirely dependent on members’ contributions of time, energy and money. Decision-making is as transparent and consensus-based as possible, invariably following extensive deliberation.

What are the challenges posed by your context and the broader societal structures and system in which you are located?

It is almost impossible to generalise about India since it is such an enormous country and diverse in every possible way, not only in terms of language, race, religion, caste, class and other such markers but also in terms of other social, cultural, economic and political factors. The status of women also varies according to class, community, location (urban-rural, socially progressive-backward states, etc.), and so on.

However, there is little doubt that it remains a predominantly a patriarchal society, where women face cultural and social barriers in their pursuit of professional careers, starting with lack of encouragement for higher education, pressures to marry and bear children, notions about "acceptable" careers for women, as well as typecasting and the proverbial glass ceiling at work.

What does practising collective feminist leadership mean within your context?

The decision that the NWMI would be a voluntary, informal, decentralised, non-hierarchical collective was made at the end of a long, animated discussion during the first national meeting of Indian women in media in 2002. The pros and cons of being structured like traditional organisations, with office-bearers, etc., and unstructured, attempting to function as an informal collective owned and guided by members on the basis of consensus, were thoroughly examined. In the end the consensus in 2002 was that if the experiment with collective functioning failed there was always the option of adopting a more formal structure and system.

Over the past two decades we have been continually striving to ensure collective ownership and decision-making. Yet, although there are no designated leaders, we have found that those who initiate action and follow through on tasks – and also happen to be older and more experienced – are often assumed to be leaders.

It is perhaps worth noting that, in recent times especially, the advantages of remaining informal and unfunded have become more evident: the network has been able to remain independent and relatively less vulnerable to harassment for taking public stands on a number of issues that may not be appreciated by the establishment.

Practising collective leadership in a growing, mainly virtual, network is admittedly challenging, given the diversity of views and positions among members. Executing programmes – such as annual meetings, local events or slightly longer-term research projects as well as more sustained initiatives – has meant translating collective ownership of a vision into practice. The attempt has been to apply democratic principles and a commitment to diversity and inclusion at every stage, from identifying members willing to participate in network activities to providing guidance to newer members who take on the task of co-ordinating activities. Feminist mentoring, which has by necessity remained largely online, involves both challenges and rewards, but the process has helped move the network towards decentralised, consensus-based functioning.

Mentoring also happens at the collective level in the form of responses to dilemmas and difficulties of various kinds highlighted by individual members (online or offline), with inputs ranging from practical information and advice to sympathy, reassurance and encouragement. This kind of support not only helps the individuals involved but, as some members have pointed out, also inspires newcomers and gives them the strength to stand their ground when they face similar situations.

Tell us how your group has tried to transform the way power is shared and used in?

The NWMI has been an amorphous organisation from day one. Of course, the fact is that someone needed to take the initiative to kickstart the process of figuring out if, how, why and in what form an association of Indian women in media could emerge. That person naturally reached out to friends and colleagues within the media to join and contribute to the effort. Among them were several who had earlier worked together as part of an informal group of media women in Mumbai. The fact that some of them also had a background of involvement in feminist and/or other rights-based groups and movements contributed towards the network's vision of gender equality and equity and the identification of goals to be pursued, including democratic functioning and power-sharing.

About a decade after the network was launched, a systematic review of internal functioning was undertaken to discuss how processes could be streamlined, and decision-making made more collective, while not compromising on speed that was of the essence in some cases – for example, while issuing statements on current topics. While recognising that members had varying levels of involvement on a regular basis, due to parallel professional and domestic commitments, the attempt was to ensure that decision-making was not dominated by only a few. The setting up of a 'Working Council' was an attempt to enhance representation and involvement of the various local chapters (through their coordinators) as well as individuals who had journeyed with NWMI since its inception. The Working Council remains a work in progress, even as the network has grown in leaps and bounds over the past few years, especially after the advent of social media, with instant messaging making communication much quicker and easier, both nationally and locally.

Aware that a non-funded network can automatically exclude the involvement of those without resources, we have also made a conscious effort to challenge the domination of city-based, English-speaking, upper caste and therefore relatively privileged journalists, through some practical initiatives. Among these are travel grants to enable members with limited resources to attend national meetings, and the fellowship (funded through member contributions) to advance professional growth among media women functioning in difficult circumstances. Participants in national meetings are encouraged to speak in languages they are comfortable in, with other members voluntarily providing translations to enable everyone to understand them. As a result, the network has been slowly evolving into a more inclusive space, with a steadily growing number of members from traditionally disadvantaged communities, living in far-flung places (including rural areas and conflict-affected parts of the country), and working in multiple languages. Much more remains to be done, of course, to ensure more diversity.

What are the core values and principles that your group believes in/embraces? How do these reflect a feminist vision of power and justice?

The following charter was put together by a group of participants during the first national meeting of women journalists in 2002, at which the NWMI was launched. It has clearly stood the test of time: it is still timely and relevant, and it more or less sums up the concerns, values and principles which continue to guide the network.

The following issues of concern were identified:

- Globalisation has adversely impacted issues of social and gender justice. In conjunction with increased commercialisation of the media, this has enhanced job insecurity.
- It has also reduced space in the mainstream media for social and developmental issues. We note with great concern that rights and benefits gained by journalists through painstaking and long struggles have been snatched away in this process.
- Though the number of women in the media across the country has increased, their working conditions have in many instances actually deteriorated.
- In addition, women face varying forms of harassment and exploitation.
- We note with particular concern the change in labour laws, the shift towards contractual employment and the overall shrinkage of employment benefits, including maternity benefits.
- The condition of regional language journalists and those in the small and independent press is of particular concern in this regard.
- We are also perturbed that the Working Journalists Act 1955 has not yet been amended to cover employees of the electronic and other new media.
- The decline in accountability and responsibility of media organisations towards their workforce and towards society in general is another area of concern.
- We believe that standards of professional ethics and behaviour have taken a beating, particularly in the last decade. This has eroded the credibility of the media, which has an important role to play as the Fourth Estate.



even these concerns, we believe that there is urgent need for building solidarities and alliances among journalists and other democratic groups and fora. Our Network of Women in Media, India is a crucial step in this direction.

Some of the steps we believe should be urgently taken are:

- Media organisations must incorporate gender justice and equity in all organisational policies.
- All benefits and employment rights of women journalists must be protected.
- The Supreme Court directive on sexual harassment (a.k.a. the Vishakha case) must be implemented by media organisations.
- Media should increase and improve coverage of gender and developmental issues.
- Media organisations and journalists should evolve and observe appropriate codes of ethics that are sensitive to gender and other critical issues.
- Organisations that protect the rights of media workers and institutions that uphold the independence and integrity of the media must be strengthened.”

(Drafted by a team of volunteers, endorsed by all participants and presented at the valedictory function on the last day of the national workshop on/for women in journalism, Delhi, January 2002)

How is your collective practicing power in a way that is aligned with your purpose and your values/principles?

First of all, from the very beginning, local networks or chapters loosely affiliated to the NWMI have been autonomous, free to establish their own priorities and modes of functioning, plan events, collaborate with other like-minded organisations, etc. They are merely requested to keep the rest of the network informed about initiatives and events. At the national level, one of the first ways in which we helped decentralise power and resources was by sharing information. At the time the network was formed there was a tendency for all information about professional opportunities – e.g., scholarships, fellowships, important publications, seminars, conferences, etc. – to be accessible mainly to media professionals based in the capital city and, if at all, to those based in a couple of other major metropolitan cities. The democratisation of such information through regular dissemination made a major difference to members based in smaller cities/towns, and especially in far-flung areas of the country. The ability to avail of such opportunities, in turn, helped increase the confidence and widen the horizons of media women across the country. This was an indirect but effective means of empowerment – through the dismantling of information monopolies.

The issuance of such statements is among the most frequent activities of the network and we try our best to make the process as participatory and consensus-based as possible within obvious time constraints. Any member is welcome to propose a statement in the listserv or social media groups and to offer to draft it. Even though the task of drafting often ends up being shouldered by a few members with a special interest in such issues, we always make an effort to ask for volunteers and sometimes succeed in recruiting a few more members into the pool of available drafters.

fourth example could be the way we organise our regular (more or less annual) three-day national meetings. From the beginning they have been held in different parts of the country – as part of the effort to decentralise, involve more members in organisational activities, enable members from across the country to get to know each other and also discover more about a different place, the concerns of people there, the intellectual, cultural and other resources available locally, etc.

Local groups are encouraged to volunteer to host these meetings, with the decision on the next venue usually taken at the previous meeting. Oftentimes local groups are relatively new and small; many members have not had the experience of attending any NWMI national meetings (which, it is widely agreed, are quite unique among gatherings of media professionals). So, they often require assistance and hand-holding through the process of putting together a meeting. A few network veterans are usually available for consultation, sharing of possibly useful past experiences and suggestions/contacts when required. But ultimately the local team decides the programme and goes about raising funds (to cover the expenses of the event only), contacting resource persons, booking venues and doing everything else related to organising the meeting.

These fairly large, long and complex events are challenging but pulling them off successfully can be a very empowering experience. Every single NWMI national meeting has been unique, stimulating and enjoyable. Organising these meetings also generally leads to the strengthening of the local group and bonding of members who may not have known each other well earlier, despite being based in the same place. Of course, sometimes there is friction and unfortunate fallouts as well (e.g., one or more members dropping out of the organising team and, less frequently, even leaving the network).

THE SELF: please describe the place and role given to self-care, inner transformation, collective care and radical healing in your collective? Please give one or two concrete examples of how individual members are supported in these aspects by the collective? This is not something we have much experience with since we are not a tangible organisation with members working together on a day-to-day basis. However, whenever instances of professional or sexual harassment, job loss, delayed (or denied) payments for work done, etc, are shared or come to the notice of members, there is usually an outpouring of sympathy, moral support and offers of more direct help. Many of our statements emerge from such instances. Several members (and even non-members whose experiences have prompted statements) have acknowledged the value of such support during difficult periods in their lives.

What have been the main challenges your collective has faced in trying to practice collective feminist leadership? How have these been tackled?

One of the biggest challenges is to help network members understand what collective functioning is all about and appreciate what it means and requires. Members tend to enjoy the benefits of a non-hierarchical organisation in which everybody has a say about everything. However, not everyone understands that an unstructured organisation with no appointed or elected leadership or paid staff can only be effective if many, if not most (let alone all), members contribute to the work involved, especially in terms of taking responsibility and seeing things through.

Consistent efforts at communicating and sharing information and potential strategies have resulted in a situation where more members are joining the ranks of the “doers” – not only volunteering for and co-ordinating ongoing tasks that keep the network going, but also proposing activities and following through on them. However, the burden of sustaining the network and ensuring that it continues to do more than “networking” and makes sincere efforts to meet its other, important goals (promoting media awareness and ethics, and working towards gender equality and justice within the media and society) still falls disproportionately on the shoulders of a few committed members.

This sometimes means that those who are most closely involved with getting things done are perceived to be Leaders when they are actually Workers! And this misperception occasionally leads to uninformed, and therefore unfortunate and somewhat unfair, allegations about some members being more equal than others, etc.

This is certainly a challenge and a conundrum that we have not yet found a solution for.

Please tell us what are some key insights/learnings that you would like to share with others who are also trying to advance collective feminist leadership.

- Power is a tricky business, since it comes with responsibilities. Successful communication of this reality by walking the talk is key to sharing power.
- Consistent mentoring through the sharing of information, goals and vision, as well as organisational history (both informal/anecdotal and formal/documented) is an important element of building collective leadership.
- Diversity and inclusiveness do not happen by themselves. Concerted, consistent efforts need to be made to question existing hierarchies of gender, class, caste, religion, language and location, both within the organisation and outside, and to systematically address injustice based on identity and other social markers.
- Feminist leadership means leaving oneself open to criticism and learning, without which collectivisation is incomplete. It is not easy but it is necessary.
- It also means being open to learning from others, including newer, younger, members of the organisation, who often contribute fresh, useful information and ideas.
- When involvement in organisational work brings joy and a sense of belonging, there are greater chances of volunteers sticking around.
- Personal relationships, warmth, empathy, mutual concern, care and trust go a long way towards building a collective community.
- A good sense of humour is an essential ingredient of feminist leadership.

Charka, India

Could you introduce your organisation?

Founded in 1994 by the visionary social activist, Sanjoy Ghose, Charkha is an innovative non-profit organisation that works towards the social and economic inclusion of rural marginalised communities through the creative use of media.

In the early 1990s, India was at the threshold of change, growing in leaps and bounds with a new liberal economy. Sanjoy was dismayed at the alarming rate at which the gap between the vibrant, informed 'India' and the socio-economically backward, unheard 'Bharat' was widening. His belief that many more writers would be needed to highlight the rising disparity, led him to bring together other writers and voluntary groups across the social sector. To disseminate the writings thus generated, the dedicated Gandhian put together a modest but efficient channel that he named Charkha, for it was intended to be a platform that would spin action into words.

With the belief that rural marginalized communities often remain unheard and have little access to information that they can use to overcome their social and economic disadvantages, Charkha is committed to empowering these communities by building their capacity to speak up at the local, state and national levels and access available resources to obtain their rights and entitlements.

Today, with its pan-India network of rural development writers, Charkha taps the power of media and communication technology to improve the quality of life of the most marginalised communities.

What are the challenges posed by your context and the broader societal structures and system in which you are located?

Charkha works in areas which are rural, remote and often inaccessible by roads. Even as India is considered to be one of the potential superpowers of the world, its rural areas are yet to benefit from this development model. The major issues of such areas are poverty, illiteracy, unemployment, homelessness and crime and violence. The voices of the communities residing in these areas fail to reach the policy makers. For example, there are villages in Poonch – the border district in J&K and one of Charkha's project areas, which are not connected by roads, and one has to trek for 7-8 hours to reach it. Communities residing in these areas are living without electricity, medical care, schools, employment opportunities and mobile network. They have no access to information on the schemes the government has launched for their development and have absolutely zero trust in local governance. One of the biggest challenges for Charkha is to reach out to these communities, build trust by listening to their grievances and enable them with information and awareness. In the last 26 years, Charkha has reached out to such communities in J&K, Ladakh, Uttarakhand, Rajasthan, Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Bihar and Andaman and Nicobar.

On another front, these rural communities have their own oppressive structures. They follow the rules of feudal societies and oppressive patriarchy. Another challenge Charkha faces is to reach out to young girls who do not have equal access to education, their parents and village leaders and find ways to address their concerns. Charkha has been working with adolescent girls and women in remote and conflict districts of Poonch, and Kargil and will now be working in Bageshwar district in Uttarakhand.

The third challenge is lack of coverage of these rural development and social issues by national media. As per a report, “the front page of average national dailies dedicated space of just 0.67% to stories of rural India”. Charkha struggles continuously to create spaces for issues of rural marginalized communities, especially women and adolescent girls in national mainstream media.

What does practicing collective feminist leadership mean within your context?

Charkha advocates for equal rights by creating equal spaces for women in the media at regional, state and national level. Stories from rural areas based on experiences of women highlighting the root causes of their challenges and contesting patriarchal norms are published through Charkha’s Trilingual Feature Service. These articles, which are meant to create a culture of awareness to counter the feudal structures in societies, are written by girls and women from the grassroots level after receiving training through our writing and skill building workshops. After attending a series of workshops, these girls and women not only write about the challenges of their peers but connect with other women and girls and train them to become ‘rural writers’.

So far, over a hundred workshops have been conducted by Charkha in the states mentioned above and around 2000 girls have attended our workshops. Of these girls, almost all have written articles on one or more development challenges, many are pursuing journalism as a career option while rest have used this training to ensure that their voices are heard. To read about some of the journeys that these women have undertaken please refer here. Practicing collective feminism through workshops:

The modules of our workshops are based on the thorough understanding of the different sub-structures and intersections which are at play, hindering the growth of women or any other oppressed identities. Collective feminism helps us to orient our thoughts and actions to make things more inclusive and non-biased. Through our workshops, which are grounded in collective feminism, they learn to raise awareness about collective support while critically evaluating the present social structures and how to use writing as a tool to counter them.

We believe our approach helps in building relationships based on trust, understanding, and teaching that would contribute towards transformative changes and forging a collective network of people from different walks of life to act towards a better tomorrow. Our writers, today, have a strong association with local Panchayati Raj Institutions, they have the confidence and knowledge to approach local authorities and demand action on the stories published. Please read these stories [HERE](#).

Please tell us how your group has tried to transform the way power is shared and used in the group?

We are a small team that not only preaches the power of communication but practices it in our daily lives. In the field, we tend to create an environment with the people we work with so that they are the ones who speak, and we listen. For example, we go to the field without any biases or pre-conceived notions. Young members of the communities discuss their challenges, they tell us about the issues they feel matter most to their communities, the challenges they face regarding availability and accessibility to resources meant for their development. They decide the issues they want to work on and which development challenge they want to write about. Our opinion is not imposed on them. In fact, they are nurtured to act and write on what matters to them most. We prepare workshop modules based on what they want to know, what information they lack, what aspects they are unaware of and not vice versa.

Please describe the place and role given to self-care, inner transformation, collective care and radical healing in your collective?

Charkha is a space where people can be vulnerable without being judged. We promote healthy behavior within our team and have a culture of checking on people regularly. Work is equally divided among the team; members have the freedom to set deadlines for themselves. We are flexible and inclusive. Everyone is equally involved, there are equal growth opportunities to nurture oneself at both professional and personal level. We organise training for our members on a regular basis to hone their knowledge and skills. This helps break the monotony and overcome the feeling of being stuck in one place. They are encouraged to attend short-term courses funded by the organisation. Recently, one of the newly joined members of the organization attended a “Two-day masterclass on Evaluation and Communication of Social Impact”. She had then shared her learning with the rest of us.

We all come from patriarchal communities, with different ideologies and approaches. As an organization, we recognize these differences and work together to overcome these biases. We organise workshops and discussions to understand the root causes, politics of gender and overcome the embedded patriarchal notions together.

What have been the main challenges your collective has faced in trying to practice collective feminist leadership? How have these been tackled?

Charkha has a huge network of rural writers across different states in India. Several of these writers have never stepped out of their villages. They are rooted in the traditional, patriarchal set-up. It requires patience, time and perseverance to break these age-old rules of patriarchy. For example, boys are allowed to attend our workshops while girls from the same family are often stopped by their parents to attend these workshops. This happens everywhere – Jammu and Kashmir, Uttarakhand, Rajasthan, Bihar, Chhattisgarh – everywhere. It’s a long process but we have achieved success here as 50% of the participants in our workshops are women and girls.

Even after the girls are 'allowed' to attend the workshop they have to face several questions from their community. For example, a new girl from a village in Jaisalmer, Rajasthan, Shivani (name changed) recently attended our workshop, and her questions reflected her anger towards the discrimination she has been facing. "Women are not allowed to talk to men, even if we manage to talk, society judges us. It happens a lot in our society. They doubt our intention and pull us down by making derogatory remarks." Her anger reflects her struggle that has prepared her to operate differently from the usual patriarchal set-up. She is challenging these norms using her innate strength and agency. The participation of these girls in our workshop is key to practicing collective feminism. We have adopted several strategies to ensure their maximum participation and are still learning.

Please tell us what are some key insights/learnings that you would like to share with others who are also trying to advance collective feminist leadership.

- It is important to listen to the experiences of people around us and identify how oppressive forces are at play in their lives. How their identity informs their experience. This should form the basis of the interventions.
- Each problem is specific to its region. To generalize is to limit its capacity to influence narratives and discourses. Thus, this approach would not be able to bring long-term changes and will fail to address the norms and beliefs that disempower women and perpetuate inequality and violence.
- The devolution of power is fundamental for advancing collective feminist leadership. It should be practiced diligently to groom and ensure feminist leadership.
- We can learn from each perspective and experience; none can outweigh the other. All views matter.
- It is imperative to create safe spaces to share personal experiences, analysing the forces shaping inequalities and injustices, in order to arrive at a deeper understanding of the root cause of the problem.

Website: www.charkha.org

Social Media: [Facebook](#) || [Instagram](#) || [Twitter](#)

Activist Support Unit, Philippines

Activist Support Unit (ASU) came together a few days before the Philippine President's fourth annual State of the Nation Address (SONA) in 2020. This was the first SONA after the administration passed the regressive Anti-Terrorism Act into law, which human rights organisations and activists believe will serve as a scapegoat for the arrest of activists and critics of the administration. It is within this context and amid the COVID-19 pandemic that Phoebe reached out to me, Shiph, about some of her thoughts on how activists were organizing for this SONA.

Phoebe shared her experience attending Black Lives Matter protests back when she was studying in the States. She shared that “prior to the scheduled protests, there was a fundraising initiative. Funds were used to purchase masks, snacks, water, and other safety supplies for the protesters who need them and to support this collective effort.”

She also shared more how people distributed art and signs to those who had none, and prior to the protests, “safety infographics that contained important safety information and items protesters should bring” were disseminated online. Like EDSA, a landmark protest in the Philippines that ousted a dictator, Phoebe saw how BLM distributed flowers for protesters to use to cancel out violence.

As someone who had been involved in the labour movement to some degree - volunteering for communications and propaganda tasks for a labour federation, I was able to connect with people who were organising for one of the rallies.

Back then I was living with immuno-compromised individuals and I knew I personally couldn't attend the SONA rallies, so I was glad to know there were other ways I could help out. There were quite a few people who were in the same situation as me and were very eager to help. That's how Activist Support Unit (ASU) was formed.

Phoebe and I, with the help of a fellow labour volunteer, April, very quickly set up a donation drive and fundraiser to collect funds for surgical masks and alcohol and even collect raincoats and umbrellas.

Eventually, ASU was able to gather more people who wanted to connect with and help activists that were more deeply involved in organising. These people would become volunteer psychological first aiders, facilitators, writers, note-takers, organisers, and much more for ASU. Us volunteers understood the collective impact of the pandemic and the anti-terror law on activists. After the SONA, ASU conducted online small-group sessions for activists and members of advocacy organisations, which would give them space to process their experiences, emotions, thoughts, and the ways they can help themselves/be supported. Their groups' initiatives are also highlighted through ASU's social media channels.

We felt it was important at the time, given our political context, that we emphasised our support for activism. We often used the slogan that became popular at this time in our

publicity materials: “Activism not Terrorism”. In our Instagram bio, we wrote out the core ideas behind how the group worked:

- Believes in the power of movements
- Collectivizing care for activists and allies
- Happy to play a supportive role

We were active for about half a year, conducting two fundraisers-slash-donation drives, and a series of mental health checks for activists, advocates, and allies. In our mental health checks, we learned that activists, organizers, movement-builders experience pressures and stressors. On top of the dominant oppressive forces that push back against them and their struggles, they often face risks, dangers, and violence that systemically target them. When organising and movement-building do not uphold well-being and healing, individual and collective trauma remain unaddressed. So, we validate these experiences and we tell them that people are around for support. After our sessions, we also debrief and process everything we hear and share and validate our thoughts and feelings too.

Eventually, we would get invitations from organizations to organise check-ins or care sessions for them. We were also invited by one organisation to give a talk on intersectionality and safe spaces, two principles that I believe inform our work, even when we weren't explicitly advertising this on social media. We aimed to be intersectional by taking into account accessibility and language barriers in our materials and activities and we established that our check-ins were safe spaces for activists and advocates. None of our sessions were recorded, only documented by note-takers.

While I felt some responsibility having gotten the group together at the start, I emphasised that I wanted the space to grow organically and to be used as people wanted it to be or as our activist friends and connections would need it to be. I think it worked because Pang, ASU “volunteer/ member/ we never really talked about what we should be called” remarked that in ASU “no one was required to do anything and everything was decided through consensus-building”.

Perhaps people will see that this would lead to our being less active, which some will even consider as a "failing" on our part. I sometimes think this, too, especially when I think about what sustaining and maybe even expanding a space like this could do for more people. Looking back, Phoebe came up with some pretty important points about what we could have done better:

“Perhaps ASU could have spent time in co-developing and discussing the vision, mission, values, principles, shared goals, intentions, etc. of ASU, what it can offer, how people involved in ASU envision working together, etc.; perhaps there could have been more time spent on clarifying alignment with these; perhaps there could have also been more clarification on what people are able to offer and commit, and discussions on the implications of these circumstances in line with the mission of ASU.”

Maybe this is something we can still think about. However, what we have right now is still something special, we have a space where we can share our activist work with each other (one of us is helping organise an electoral campaign!), where we can always reach out for help when we need it in our own organisations (i.e., organizing care sessions and check-ins), where everyone thanks each other for every single act of labour and where people always step in to help in whatever way they can.

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