

**WOMEN LEADERS AT THE FRONT LINE**  
**A Study of Rural and Small-Town Women Leaders**  
In Three North Indian States

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**GENDER AT WORK-INDIA**  
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## **LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS**

**DM:** District Magistrate

**EWR:** Elected Women Representatives

**FIR:** First Information Report

**IWM:** Indian Women's Movement

**MLA:** Member of Legislative Assembly

**MGNREGA:** Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act

**MS:** Mahila Samakhya

**NGO:** Non Governmental Organisation

**OBC:** Other Backward Classes

**PRI:** Panchayati Raj Institution

**PWDVA:** Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act

**SC:** Scheduled Caste

**SEWA:** Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA)

**SHG:** Self-Help Group

**ST:** Scheduled Tribe

**UP:** Uttar Pradesh

**VAW:** Violence against Women

**WDP:** Women's Development Programme

## GLOSSARY

**Anganwadi:** early child-care centre in the government's Integrated Child Development Services programme

**Bhedbhav:** discrimination

**Block:** an administrative sub-division of a district

**Dalit:** Refers to those considered the 'lowest' or 'untouchables' outside the Hindu caste system

**Dharna:** protest

**Didi:** Elder sister in Hindi language; term of respect while addressing someone more senior or experienced than you

**Jati panchayat/ Khap panchayat:** powerful traditional caste based institutions

**Jazba:** passion, emotion

**Karyakarta:** field worker

**Kasbah:** small town

**Mahila:** woman

**Manch:** platform/forum

**Naara:** slogan

**Sangathan:** grassroot-level structures or institutions

**Sarkari:** government

**Sarpanch:** elected head of the Panchayat

**Sati:** practice in which women immolate themselves at their husband's funeral pyre

**Thana:** police station

**Nari adalat:** women's court

**Pakad:** command

**Panchayat:** village-level of local self government, with elected representatives

**Pehchaan:** identity, recognition

**Pracheta:** Field worker in the Women's Development Programme, Rajasthan, who coordinated the work of 10 villages

**Pradhan:** elected head of the Panchayat

**Purdah:** a practice, across some Hindu and Islamic communities by which women's bodies are covered

**Saathin:** friend; village-level animator in the Women's Development Programme

**Sahayogini:** Field worker in Mahila Samakhya Programme; as the programme expanded was the mentor and resource for the grassroots women's federations

**Sakhi:** friend; village-level worker in the Mahila Samakhya Programme

**Sampark:** connections

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## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

*This research study seeks to unpack the leadership practices of women NGO leaders from rural, semi-urban and small towns backgrounds in three North Indian states.*

### **LOCATING THE STUDY: WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP IN THE INDIAN CONTEXT**

Women's leadership development has recently received considerable attention from a variety of actors – women's groups, the State, non-governmental organisations (NGOs hereafter), donors and international donor agencies -- nationally and globally. However, the nature of women's leadership practices are under-researched. In particular not much is known about the backgrounds of women leaders from rural, semi-urban areas and smaller cities, who work in rural areas. This research report primarily seeks to fill this gap.

Two important sites that have fostered women's leadership building in the Indian context have been the women's movement and the State. The autonomous women's movement (having no political affiliation) has evolved over the past five decades, so naturally have the nature of women's leadership and organisational strategies. Some of the regularly invoked concepts - power, collectivity, non-hierarchical relationships, democratic functioning and reflexivity - continue to inform feminist discourse on organisation and leadership building. The leaders that emerged and spoke for the movement in the early decades were largely urban, educated, from the big metropolises and in many ways continue to do so.

By the Eighties, Indian feminists (and organisations) started working in partnership with the State to ground ideas of 'women's empowerment' in practice. Three key initiatives which saw the State and women's groups coming together in the Eighties and Nineties were - the initiation of large-scale women's empowerment and development programmes, the 73<sup>rd</sup> Constitutional Amendment (popularly called the Panchayati Raj Act) which reserved a third of seats locally elected bodies for women and the promotion of Self Help Groups (SHGs hereafter) to economically empower women. The Women's Development Programme (1982) in the north-western state of Rajasthan is considered to have pioneered new institutional arrangements between the State and women's groups, and of urban feminists working with rural women, to develop new pedagogies for training, learning and leadership. While there are several critiques of each of these initiatives, what they did do was to bring rural women into play leadership roles at the community level.

The Nineties mark a watershed that significantly changed the nature of the Indian Women's Movement. There was a proliferation in the number of NGOs across the country. Debates began to take place around the movement's increased institutionalisation (often described as 'NGOisation') and specialisation (the development of domain specific expertise for example, health, livelihoods, law), the increased dependence on donor funding, and professionalisation through the creation of urban research and advocacy groups. The



resultant changes in the nature, and modes of working of the women's movement have been variously critiqued as 'co-option', development of 'career feminism' and a loss of the movement's 'transformative politics'. Some of the closely held tenets of feminist leadership and organisational cultures have been called into question and some commentators have written about the creation of 'hybrid' women's organisations, that combine activism and rights-based work, alongside implementing projects with the State or donors.

Parallely, since the 2000s one has witnessed a changing class, caste, religious and locational character of the women's movement's leadership. The urban, educated, and upper-caste character of the movement and its leadership were questioned by feminists and activists from subaltern groups, like Dalits and Muslims. These groups have both fought for visibility within the larger women's movement and simultaneously established autonomous Dalit and Muslim women's organisations, for example. Such developments have been based on changes in political consciousness around issues of identity, secularism and development and important national policy changes that began recognising the rights of socially excluded groups. Thus new debates and issues, and sites of contestation and engagement related to women's leadership have come to the fore.

### **Rationale for the Study**

The discourses around women's leadership are dominated by either urban women, from metropolitan cities who come with the privileges of educational and professional training, or by grassroots woman leaders whose experiences of struggle and empowerment have been fairly extensively documented. A group of women leaders who are largely absent from these representations are those who have emerged as leaders through the process of mobilising grassroots women. Often referred to as 'catalysers' or facilitators, these women are from a different class background to either the more urbane or grassroots leaders: their origins are in the rural hinterland, *kasbahs* or peri-urban spaces or smaller cities; and have limited educational and professional qualifications. This group of women began their working lives in the development sector, playing the role of intermediaries, between larger women's groups or State-led women's development programmes and grassroots women, but have subsequently moved out to set up their own organisations. They are in many ways the outcome of the ideals, practices and interventions of the Indian Women's Movement. Yet not much is known about their personal biographies, socio-economic backgrounds, motivations, strategies and challenges. Thus by focussing on this group of women leaders and the organisations they lead, this study hopes to illuminate an under-researched area, that will enrich the existing knowledge of women's leadership practices and thereby contribute towards identifying further actions that will strengthen women's organisations and leadership development practices.

## Research Questions

1. What are the leadership practices of women leaders from rural, peri-urban and smaller cities, who work in rural-based NGOs in North India?
2. What are socio-economic backgrounds of these women leaders and how have they come to occupy positions of leadership? What factors have impacted their leadership practices and shaped the vision of the organisations they lead?
3. How do the leadership practices of this group of women relate to prevailing understandings of feminist leadership?

## Overview of Study Design & Methodology

**Scope:** This is primarily a qualitative study, but includes a quantitative component. It was carried out in three North Indian states - Rajasthan, Uttarakhand and Uttar Pradesh. It seeks to answer the questions posed above by drawing on the qualitative data gathered through in-depth research carried out with eight NGOs and 24 first and second-line leaders from these NGOs. The quantitative component maps the broader field of women-led NGOs located in rural, semi-urban and urban centres based on data gathered from 71 NGOs and 150 women leaders across the three states. The data collection took place in 2013-14. Initial findings were presented at a national consultation in 2014, and the final report was prepared in 2015.

## Methodology

*Selection of study location:* The states were selected as they provide a diversity context with regard to development indicators, the nature of development and women's empowerment programmes and people's movements. The study has however, not sought to identify state-wise differences but the state-level contexts were taken into consideration while analysing the qualitative and quantitative findings.

*Selection of sample:* The three basic criteria that were used to select the NGOs for both the qualitative and quantitative studies, were as follows. The NGO should be women-led, by a woman or a group of women in *practice* (this was verified in the process of sample selection); the selected NGO must be located in rural, semi-urban areas, and small cities (non-metro cities). The NGO should be registered, funded, in operation for at least three years, and should identify working on women's empowerment, development and rights (however defined) as one of its core mandates.

**Quantitative study:** The specific objectives of the quantitative study were to: Develop a socio-economic profile of women leaders; gather basic information regarding the organisation (date of starting, sectors and scale of work, scale and sources of funding;

gather basic information on internal functioning of the organisation. A snowballing technique was used to identify NGOs that fitted the above criteria for which key informants were interviewed and NGOs directories scanned.

### **The Qualitative Study:**

*Framework:* A framework was developed to explore the perspectives of women leaders on critical concepts of feminist leadership and organisations namely, power, equality, empowerment, rights and justice. The NGOs selected did not necessarily identify as being 'feminist' but the study has related the research findings with prevailing understandings of feminist leadership. The concepts that leaders' used were connected to the domain of praxis and experience, where the ways in which women leaders had shaped their organisation's work, developed programmes and devised strategies were explored. The leaders engagement with public or external world (eg structures, networks, bureaucracy, police etc) were described and analysed. The study sought to understand the private or internal world of the organisation: the evolution of the organisation's structures, rules, norms, hierarchies, governance mechanisms and organisational cultures.

## **BUILDING A PROFILE OF WOMEN LEADERS**

### **Who Are These Leaders?**

The following categories - age, caste, educational levels, marital status and leaders' family backgrounds - were used to develop a profile of women leaders.

*Age:* The principal finding was that the largest number of women leaders (43%) were in the 30-40 age bracket, and 60% were 40 years or below, indicating that younger women have the space to play leadership roles within the organisations studied. The qualitative data offers two possible explanations for the predominance of this age group: First, most second-line leaders have worked themselves up the organisation's ladder, and come into their own in terms of experience, confidence and maturity at this juncture (after 10 or more years of work). Secondly, many of the women in the sample had married young, and this was a point in their life cycle when they had completed their child-bearing and rearing responsibilities and other domestic responsibilities.

*Caste and Religion:* There are two important finding related to the caste composition of the profile. First, that the sample had an upper-caste bias. A majority (60.2%) of the women leaders belonged to so-called higher castes;<sup>1</sup> nearly 25% belonged to Other Backward Classes (OBCs), and only 6.8% and 6.0% to Scheduled Castes (Dalits)<sup>2</sup> and Scheduled

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1 Castes which do not benefit from reservations, also referred to as General Caste.

2 The official terms Scheduled Caste (SC) and Tribe (ST) were used in the survey. In this report we are using Dalits and Adivasis as these were the preferred terms of the participants.

Tribes (Adivasis) respectively. The majority of the leaders (74.4%) in the sample were Hindus and 17.3% were Muslim. The low representation of Dalits, Adivasis and Muslims was also evident in the composition of governing boards - 43% of the governing boards did not have a single member from Dalit or Adivasi communities, 50% had no member from OBC communities and 54% had no Muslim members. These findings are noteworthy as these communities form the major share of the 'target' group of most organisations and yet do not find representation in the leadership or governance structures.

The second striking finding is the difference in the caste composition of first and second-line leaders. There is a far higher representation of women from Dalit and OBC communities at the second level. 11% of the second-line leaders are Dalit, compared with 2.8 % at the first level. In the case of OBCs it is 19.7% (first-line) and 27.4% (second-line). The qualitative data suggests that the high representation of Dalits amongst the second line leaders is reflective of the conscious strategies of the first-line leaders of hiring local women. It also reflects the difficulties for such women to come into first-line leadership due to low levels of education and social and cultural resources. The shift in the caste representation points to an emerging leadership potential amongst women from disadvantaged communities, a constituency that would benefit from investments in capacity building.

*Education:* The findings related to education show that 66.9% of the women leaders were graduates or had higher qualifications. However, when disaggregated around caste, leaders from higher castes were educationally more privileged, which corroborates the point raised previously. While 81.3% of upper castes were graduates (or above), of the nine Dalit leaders, only two were educated above Class 12 and similarly among the 31 OBC leaders - only 50% were educated above Class 12. Further given the finding that Dalits comprise a greater proportion of second-line leaders, differences in educational qualifications between first and second-line leaders are sharp - 63% of the first-line leaders are post-graduates in contrast to 25% amongst the second line. What is striking, however, is the fact that 7.9% of second-line leaders are illiterate. This disassociation between leadership with literacy and educational levels or the fact that women with lower levels of literacy are seen to have leadership abilities points to an important aspect of the nature of women's leadership - that of actively providing opportunities and nurturing younger and more local women to become leaders.

*Leadership and Living Situation:* The relationship status (single, married, divorced, widowed etc) of this sample shows significantly different results when compared to the general situation. For instance, while 62.4% of the leaders were married at the time of the survey (and represents a majority), it is lower than the national figure of 75% of women between age 15 and 49 who are reported being married according to the National Family Health Survey (2005-06). Further, 19% of the women interviewed were never married and

the rest were either separated or divorced. Women are possibly exercising their right to marry later, or opt out of difficult marriages, often supported by the organisations where they work, as mentioned in the qualitative study.

### **Trajectories of Working Lives**

The survey asked women leaders two sets of questions related to their interest of working with rural women: who and what motivated them to work with their present organisation?

In relation to *who* motivated the women to join the organisation they were working with: for 50% of the leaders, one or more of their family members were working in this sector, often in the same organisation. For the first-line leaders, 28% were motivated by individuals outside of their current organisation (of which 82% were family members) and 19.7% reported that they were self motivated. In comparison, 41.9% of second-line leaders reported that they were influenced by individuals in their current organisations and 30.7% by the work of their present organisations. Thus a critical role played by women leaders has been to motivate and develop a cadre of women activists to work on issues related to women's rights.

With regard to *what* motivated the women leaders, of the sample as many as 69% of the first-line leaders were the founders of the organisation, and 50% had worked in similar organisations before starting their own. A few respondents revealed in their qualitative interviews that their strong motivation to set up their own organisation was a reaction to the discrimination – ranging from sexual harassment to hindering professional progress and denying playing leadership roles – they had experienced in their earlier working environments. In sharp contrast, the current organisation was the first work place of nearly 35% of the second-line leaders and less than 25% had worked in the development sector before. 61.3% of the second-line leaders have gradually moved up in the leadership hierarchy having started from volunteer or field-level positions.

### **LEADERSHIP JOURNEYS: KEY OBSERVATIONS FROM THE QUALITATIVE STUDY**

Interviews with 25 of the women leaders were conducted, based on a life-history approach, and used to understand how their lived experiences, family and personal backgrounds have shaped their working lives, the organisations they have formed and lead. These narratives provides a rich texture to the study findings. Some of the key elements from the individual biographies that have implications for leadership practices were:

*Processing critical events:* Women leaders narrated several events in their childhoods as being critical turning points, some with possibilities of resistance and others suppressed and silenced at the time. Complex and difficult circumstances, of extreme poverty, violence, and insecurity were constructed as moments of resistance and were recalled to indicate

leadership traits that were evident while they were growing up. What was important to read in their narratives was how these incipient acts of resistance, silences, and 'bad experiences' in their childhoods have been processed, and transformed into new perspectives through support and opportunities provided in many cases by women's groups. Several women mentioned that gender trainings, exposure to the women's movement, and relationships with other feminists had enabled them to process these.

*Critically analysing family and the institution of marriage:* For several of the women leaders marriage was a critical turning point in their lives and the biographies revealed three types of experiences: one, where violence both physical and mental were experienced; second, where women had to confront humiliation and mental torture; and third, where discrimination was not necessarily overt, but insidious and deep-rooted nonetheless. There were strong connections between women's own lived experiences of violence and the determination with which these women leaders work on this issue.

A second common theme was of how women struggled to get out of these difficult situations. While several narratives were about personal grit, an important aspect that surfaced pertained to the role of the intervener - women's rights activists - who played critical roles in the lives of these women that were in sharp contrast to their family members. Many of these women leaders have often moulded themselves on the lines of the women activists who had given them support and nurtured their leadership. They now play these roles with courage, commitment and conviction for other women. Further, the strategies employed while working on violence often mirror their own journeys to combat violence.

Thirdly, the process of dealing with the tensions of balancing work and family in the women leaders' own lives is mirrored in the support they provide their own staff. They do so with patience and with the conviction that providing this space, strategising with women workers on how to deal with irate and unreasonable husbands is a central role required of leaders, to build institutions and second-line leadership. This ties up with a mandate that women leaders assign themselves - of nurturing and inspiring other women to join and stay with the organisation - and is borne out by the quantitative data which shows that the second-line leadership has predominantly been built by the founders of organisations.

*Committing to a cause:* Often unfamiliar with NGO cultures, the women leaders, especially second-line leaders, described how scepticism slowly turned to engagement and then a life-long commitment. The women described how they got 'hooked' to the work, and an important part of this process was the 'immersion' with the lives of women and deep bonds that were established with the field. This commitment and conviction were important

characteristics of leadership and one that the first-line try to pass on to others who they draw into their organisation.

## **UNPACKING LEADERSHIP PRACTICES**

The womens' leadership practices were analysed in two domains - the public and the private. In observing them in the public domain, the study seeks to understand the nature of work that women-led organisations do and why; the changes they have made over the years; their interactions with the State, community and other civil society organisations. The private, in this context, refers to the internal workings of the organisations, that is organisational structures, norms, values and culture and management of resources (both human and financial).

## **ENGAGING THE PUBLIC SPHERE: STRATEGIES, APPROACHES AND CHALLENGES**

The data revealed three main areas where patterns of leadership practices could be discerned. These were their approaches to working on women's issues; strategies used to establish leadership with the community; and their engagements with the State. While none of these are watertight they provide an interesting clustering of leadership issues.

### **Conceptualising and Operationalising Gender Equality**

#### ***Approaches***

For the leaders in the study, 'woman' was the main analytical, conceptual and political category that they used, and women were the main 'targets' of the interventions. Ensuring 'Haq, Adhikar aur Mauka (rights, entitlements and opportunities) for women captured the vision and mission of a majority of leaders. The study identified three approaches with which women leaders addressed issues of gender equality and women's rights.

In the first approach, working on development for all women was seen as the main strategy to attain gender equality. Women leaders (and the organisation) positioned themselves as 'catalysts' for bringing about change in women's lives by enabling women to access entitlements (through various methods, including protest and advocacy), ensuring that the schemes and programmes initiated by the State reach the poorest women and nudging the delivery system to respond to the needs of poor, rural women. In this approach, while there was awareness around community-specific (for example based on caste and religion) needs and differences, these were viewed as incidental to their work and strategies were thus undifferentiated. Focusing on specific groups of women or on particular identities was seen as divisive and not in consonance with their understanding that all women experience powerlessness regardless of their caste or religion.

In the second approach women's leaders focussed on specific communities, and addressed their needs and issues. Here women's secondary status within larger community identities (like caste or religion) was a key factor for mobilising and organising women. For this group of leaders, fighting for the equality of women within the community was as important as making demands on the State. The leadership strategically positioned their interventions within community-based bodies like caste-based panchayats and religious forums and created mechanisms for women to engage with these on a regular basis.

The third approach was to work on gender in relation to its intersections with other forms of identity. Working with this approach was found challenging as often the leader's own community or identity was brought to the fore. Leaders acknowledged that it was a constant struggle for them to assume their identity simply as women's rights advocate or development workers. Where leaders attempted to work across communities, for example in building both Dalit and Muslim women's forums, identity politics (from within the communities and outside) were sharply foregrounded. As women, the leaders were aware that eventually it was not just their rhetoric that mattered, how they looked, the clothes they wore, their persona were critical to how their leadership would be accepted or challenged.

The study also showed that leaders made strategic choices and drew on different approaches to handle particular issues or cases. For example, a group specifically working with tribal women also actively pursued cases of violence against women, which covered women from all castes and religious communities. Overwhelmingly however, irrespective of their own community identities or those of the communities with which they worked, this set of women leaders framed their work in terms of gender equality, which helped them break community-based identities and gave them the power to intervene.

### **Violence as an Important Site for Transforming Gender Relations**

Violence against women (VAW hereafter) was as the issue that almost all the leaders prioritised and worked on, regardless of whether they had the resources for it or not. Close to 80% of the 71 organisations surveyed identified empowering women and preventing violence against women as their priorities. With 'women's empowerment', 'women's development' and 'women's rights' becoming buzz words, the leaders constantly strove to show how they were different and working consistently and against all odds on VAW was one way in which they did this.

The qualitative data points to three sets of influencing factors for prioritising work on VAW. One was the leaders' first-hand experiences of facing violence and in dealing with it (as mentioned previously); second was that violence was a fundamental way in which gender inequality and power were expressed and women's subordinate status maintained;



and third was the importance of VAW cases in enhancing their 'learning' about local politics and in establishing their leadership in the area.

Several women leaders had come to the organisations where they now worked as battered women (or 'cases') themselves and their own journeys to recover a semblance of dignity and hope had led them to believe that it was possible to work on this issue with positive results. Some organisations had made it an unwritten hiring policy, applying the principle that personal experience was a powerful educator, thus women who have faced violence and have fought back are well placed to pursue cases and support other women.

However, it would be problematic to essentialise the work on VAW as based entirely on experience or on the fact of being women. Many first-line leaders had been part of women's empowerment programmes prior to starting out on their own and some had even undergone gender trainings, where they had had the opportunity to develop a critical perspective on violence. The coming together of the personal and the political created a context where the leaders passionately took on this issue in the field.

Several leaders had asserted their power in the area and established their leadership by taking on cases of violence. These cases had pushed the leadership into the limelight vis-à-vis the women, community, the State machinery and the local media. Many identified these cases as being critical learning events where they were able to concretely understand how complex intersections between caste and gender relations get played out, the underlying local politics, or reflecting and working on these cases enabled them to make connections between the individual and structural dimensions of violence. The decision made by the leaders, as to which case to pick and turn it into a public issue, and the ability to withstand multiple pressures established their leadership both in their own eyes and in those of the team they led.

### **Strategies to Establish Leadership within the Community**

*Gaining community level trust:* Leaders across organisations consistently used the terms *pakad* (having control in terms of understanding the community and issues), *sampark* (creating contacts) and *pehchaan* (building an identity) as central to their approach to building trust and engagement with rural women. They constantly reiterated that it was only by establishing a direct and intimate connection with women – individually as well as their kinship, families, engaging with their beliefs, cultural practices and their issues - that enabled leaders to claim the right to represent and speak for rural women. The long-term investment of time in these processes, the intensity of engagement is what they believed sets them apart from other NGOs (usually referring to male-headed), community and political leaders.

*Creating a persona:* Most of the leaders studied said they had *chosen* to come and work in the area (where the NGO was located) and therefore had not used family connections (either parental or marital) or did not have 'male protection': this they reported challenged patriarchal norms in fundamental ways. These women were neither elite (urbane, or from very wealthy backgrounds) nor unfamiliar (as they were broadly from the 'area'). Thus building a 'distinct' identity was an important part of the leadership process. Leaders said they consciously created 'a persona' for themselves and tried to establish themselves by the work that she wanted to do. Several women reported that the actions of women leaders challenged dominant 'good woman' images, and generated feelings of both fear and awe. The construction of particular identities and personas were not just individual issues of the leader, but also established the organisations' work as being genuine, unique and grounded and therefore different from other NGOs and government initiatives.

*Building strength through structures:* An integral part of the leadership's strategy was to establish grassroots-level institutions. They believed (unanimously) that institutions were necessary to take their vision to the grassroots level and that the process of sustaining change was contingent on setting up structures through which both the NGOs and the women leaders could negotiate with the community and the State. In the initial phases of organisation building the founders had been actively involved in envisioning and establishing these structures and gradually passed on this role of mobilising, rapport building and sustaining to the second-line leaders. However, the leaders continued to play an important role in thinking through various institutional processes of formalising, federating, establishing mechanisms to ensure accountability, dealing with crises with these institutions and in building their leadership skills. The women in these formations too drew power from their partnership with the leaders. As these grassroots institutions came into their own, they too made claims, pressurised and pushed the leadership to take on challenging issues.

Secondly, it was through these structures that the leadership continued to remain grounded, even as the NGOs expanded the scale of their operations, moved on to taking on different projects or into newer areas. While projects often placed restrictions on NGOs or when they had to establish their position vis-à-vis the State, these grassroots institutions continued to act as pressure groups. Unlike local male leaders, this group of leaders neither had the class privilege of urban, educated women nor did it draw on their own kinship and identity-based local power structures. It is the grassroots-level organisation that empowers and establishes the leader in the local context, as well as to garner credibility with other stakeholders like the government and funding agencies.

## **Engaging the State**

For leaders working in the rural heartland, the State is negotiated on a daily basis across a wide range of institutions: health and education, law enforcement agencies or then the local administration. It was the source of welfare and entitlements on one hand, and on the other, an instrument of coercive power through the local police and administration. To engage with and against these multiple faces of the State, leaders devise a variety of strategies. Speaking in different tongues is a core aspect of working at the block and district level, and those leaders who are able to traverse this landscape are viewed as credible and 'respected' leaders. A reflection of having gained that level of recognition was women leaders' inclusion in district-level committees (sexual harassment committees or then those related to education, health etc ). Women leaders viewed these as critical forums to intervene in and bring their own experience, knowledge and network to bear upon the workings of these committees.

Many of the leaders proactively worked on government projects, and sought government funds and resources as part of their role as leaders in linking their local women's institutions to State initiatives. However, working with government departments was difficult: corruption constantly shadowed their interactions with local functionaries. The majority of the leaders pointed out that it was becoming increasingly difficult in the last five years for them to access funds from state or national government schemes and much depended on the sensitivity of a senior official to push through such grants.

## **Accessing the Law**

All the organisations engaged with the police and the courts on a regular basis, especially in their work on VAW. These interactions were invariably power-laden. For many leaders and organisations, the struggle begins at the first port of call – getting the police to register the First Information Report (FIR) at the police station. Taking the case from the FIR to the courts demands time, patience and resources. Given that majority of the organisations work on this issue without funds, this is unsustainable. Apart from resources, another aspect of the challenge is the degree of knowledge required to engage with a legal system. Having knowledge or lacking it makes all the difference in terms of how one is 'treated' by the police or legal system and this distinguishes first and second-line leaders and puts pressure on the leadership for being the constant source of information.

## **Being Female in the Field**

While the leadership has learnt the skills of negotiating and confronting the local police, through strategies that range from cajoling, prodding, questioning and and confronting, engaging with a system that is dominated by men is extremely challenging for women leaders and their predominantly female staff. Propositions for sexual favours are routine.

Women's mobility and confidence to engage with men leads to assumptions that they are sexually promiscuous. But women leaders learn and then teach their staff how to negotiate these power-laden dynamics. Strategies include doing ground work on what the reputation of the officer is, finding out when and where the meeting will be held; refusing to attend a call or going as a group.

Leaders expressed their frustration and stated that they often experience no sense of progress where dealing with issues related to VAW is concerned: they continue to battle 'mindsets', just as they did a decade ago. Take the case of caste panchayats, that involve powerful men in the community and the fear of reprisal is high - women leaders have effectively used the legal system to threaten and thus create alternative options for justice. They also use constitutional guarantees as a way of entering spaces and then also seek to reform the institutions from within. A third way has been to create their own alternative forums like 'naari adalats' (women's courts).

## **LEADERSHIP AND ORGANISATIONAL DEVELOPMENT**

The idea of leadership – what it does, how it functions and what it thinks – becomes explicit around the roles it plays within the organisation. In this study the following roles emerged through the discussions as important leadership roles. These were to build and develop a team; pass on leadership skills; keep abreast of new domains of knowledge; set organisational cultures and crisis management.

### **The Idea of the Collective**

The metaphor (used by one leader) that most aptly captured the nature and style of leadership for this set of women leaders was that of a 'Kafila': a caravan where the founder leads and motivates others to join in. The leader's role in this metaphor was to keep increasing the size of the caravan and to keep it moving. Leaders described their leadership style as being intimate and relationship-based, and working intensively in small teams.

In all the organisations studied there was a 'core group' of women who had a sense of ownership of the organisation. This group of second-line leaders had taken over some of the roles played by the founders or heads, most commonly the daily functioning of the organisation and engaging with the community. While the kafila grew it had also become messier with emerging leaders also pulling it along (and not always in the same direction). However, the organisation's head (most often the founder) continued to be the fulcrum of decision making, strategising, nurturing emerging leadership, dealing with crisis, and fund raising.

A subset of team building is that of selecting and identifying women to join the organisation. In the early phases of the organisations' growth, leaders went house to house,

village to village to motivate women to join (a continuation of the kafila image). Several organisations drew on the women who came with their own cases to become part of the team, as they believed that women who have struggled or are in the process of fighting for their rights are more likely to identify with and commit themselves to the organisation. Thus the process of hiring is not the usual formalised process followed, but leaders rely on intuition and often look for skill sets other than those strictly required to perform specific tasks. However, such approaches are not without challenges.

The in-depth interviews revealed that leaders believed that they have been mentored and provided opportunities to develop the leadership skills they have accumulated over the years. They thus try and replicate this process. The nature of leadership is revealed in the investments they make in terms of time and emotional energy to draw women out of difficult situations and into the world of work. The onus of thinking through the steps and providing opportunities for team members to learn lay with the leadership. Organising trainings, exposure trips and training people on the job was part of the idea of building the stakes of the team in the work of the organisation. Formalised trainings or inputs in organisational development to develop leadership or to reflect on their organisations were not reported.

One of the roles that the leadership had to play was to keep abreast of new domains of knowledge. Having this information was what made one a leader, whether in dealing with the administration, the field, or one's own team. The information flowed from the leader, to the second-line and from there to the field and the information gathered from the field flowed in the reverse fashion. The processes for accessing this information for these leaders based in kasbahs and smaller towns was erratic. Some depended on networks that they were part of, others local sources. The much touted flow of information through the internet was still not a regular and preferred option, and certainly one that was out of reach for the second-line leaders. However, what was appreciated (the few occasions where it had been made possible) were spaces that combined learning 'technicalities' with a process of reflection.

### **Setting the Culture of the Organisation**

Leaders had the challenging responsibility of establishing the organisation's culture. This included identifying and transmitting values, putting into practice ideas of equality, including gender equity, negotiations around relationships of power, and the politics of identity and knowledge embedded in the everyday practices of the organisation. Setting the tone and tenor of how interactions will take place within the organisation falls on the shoulders of the leader.

These organisations work with teams that include women and men from the local community, and these teams are located within a larger patriarchal and unequal context. This defines the world view and culture that their team members enter the organisation with. Male staff typically expected to be served tea by the women – ‘As they could do it better’. Other examples were of male staff who found it ‘difficult’ to work with women colleagues, who were assertive and articulate. Leaders also felt that male staff worked with greater interest and commitment on land rights, education or forest rights as compared with engaging with issues of violence against women. For a leadership that works on the idea of gender equity and draws on women from marginalised communities and poor backgrounds, this creates its own challenges and makes investment in building their leadership over a period of time a critical component of their work. Some of the common challenges that were highlighted are as follows:

*Dynamics around project management:* As organisations grew they increasingly took on funded project work. Leaders have had to manage the demands of project goals and funder requirements, with collective and informal styles of functioning. For example, in some organisations, the holistic idea of a team dissolved into project-wise identification and a division of staff according to funding agencies, where ownership was towards projects and its targets, rather than the organisation and its vision. These often had disastrous implications for team dynamics.

In several organisation that have taken on projects, they have had to hire staff with higher educational or professional skills, who are usually from more urban backgrounds, often at senior positions and with higher salaries. Schisms have developed between the older, less educated, local women and the new entrants. In some organisations project requirements have meant hiring men for technical jobs and fault lines have developed around gender – where men performing technical jobs are more valued.

*Organisations, caste and identity:* While this set of leaders openly take on gender-related internal organisational challenges, discussion on biases and discrimination along other axes of identity are not as directly addressed. These are usually masked, for example, by insisting that ‘casteism’, does not find a place in the organisation’s culture. Some organisations however, have actively tried to break caste and religious biases by breaking taboos related to food and water (which cuts across both caste and religious identities) both within the organisation and in the grassroots women’s institutions. As with food and water, tasks like cleaning the toilet are considered polluting and only performed by those at the bottom of the caste hierarchy. The leadership of one organisation decided to shake up the organisation by asking that all staff, including the leadership, would take turns to clean the toilet.

*Sexuality:* Leaders described decision making and arbitrating on issues of sexuality as being a complicated terrain to negotiate. On the one hand women leaders believed that their perspective on sexuality was progressive. Most saw sexuality as a women's rights issue (for example, of working women being at a disadvantage vis-à-vis other male workers, or in terms of women having the right to make relationship choices outside prescribed gender norms). But when these perspectives were put into practice, tensions erupted within the organisation and in several cases experienced and committed staff left. It was difficult, if not impossible, for women leaders to take stands that support unconventional behaviour. The dilemmas that leaders faced were often rooted in the fragility of their own situations and identities - as single women, with high mobility and a public presence. There was a need to be seen as 'good women', working on socially acceptable issues and acting in a manner that upholds the 'character' of the organisation.

Most organisations have had no perspective building on issues of sexuality that could provide them tools to address such issues from a feminist understanding. Some leaders found it hard to demarcate the boundaries between what is private and what is public, or deciding whether there is space for breaking certain social norms related to sexuality within the organisation. And those leaders who viewed themselves as feminist and had a critique of patriarchy have had to battle their own discomfort, constantly questioning themselves on whether they have taken the right decisions.

### **Raising financial resources**

With regard to financial resources, four major issues were identified: the role of the leader in raising funds; the quantum of funding and its sources and the nature of interactions between the organisations and funders.

*Leaders' role:* Raising financial resources had increasingly become one of the most critical roles that first-line leaders were playing. 60% of the leaders reported in the quantitative study that fund raising had been the major activity over the past year. This was described by many leaders as being a burden and, unlike several other roles, this was one that only the first-line leader could play. Thus it was also an important source of power for the leader.

*Quantum of funds and sources:* A majority of the organisations (nearly one-third) surveyed reported their the average annual budget (over 3 years) as being less than 5 lakhs, which is an extremely small amount. Most such organisations depended on volunteers to do the organisation's work. On the other hand, a little more than 20% of the organisations had a budget of over 50 lakhs.

The survey results showed that many organisations depend on self generation and individual donations. Government projects are important for more than half the organisations. The corporate sector plays a very small role, contributing barely 10% of the total share of funding in these women-led organisations. A relatively high proportion (40%) depend on foreign donors. However, the major sources of support were government projects, individual donations and self generation by the group and its leadership. Moreover there was some correlation with different funding sources and budget size. The organisations with annual budgets of less than 10 lakh rupees received funds from government sources, self-generated income or individual donations. Very few organisations in this category received funds from other sources. The organisations with large annual budgets – those above Rs 50 lakhs - received funds from various sources government projects and foreign donations being prominent among these. For the small-budget organisations fellowships have been an important source of support. Sometimes all project expenses are met by the few who received fellowships.

*Nature of interaction with funders:* In the initial phases of the organisations' histories, large funds were not sought and in fact, working with limited resources was seen to establish the character of the leadership, of being committed and able to work under hard conditions. Later most of the leaders sought to increase their access to resources and funds. Expansion of work and projects implied increased interactions with funders, negotiations over work priorities and budgets and establishing credibility with a different universe (compared with the community or the local state).

Leaders talked of their interactions with funders being power laden, and they felt a deep sense of inadequacy. The felt their identity as grassroots organisations put them at a disadvantage compared with big city organisations; they lacked of command over English which resulted in being unable to present their work effectively; and the lack of other skills related to data management, reporting requirements etc. The leaders constantly worried about their organisation's agenda being undermined by that of the funder. Where funders were able to bridge this feeling of inequality, build on the organisation's agendas, and provide the organisation meaningful capacity-building inputs, the interaction has been affirming. Leaders acknowledged that their association with certain funders gave them opportunity to link up with larger campaigns and networks, taking them out of other specific local context to gain a macro picture on the issues they worked on. Leaders held on to a desire of not being viewed as 'other NGO's', who might take on projects purely for financial benefits.



## **Concluding Points**

### *Class and Caste Composition*

The leadership mirrors the situation that exists in big cities, where the IWM leadership has been and continues to be predominantly upper caste. It is the second-line leadership that reflects a distinct change, showing a far higher presence of Dalit and women from OBC communities, indicating the role the founding leaders have played in bringing women from marginalised groups into this sector of work and decision making.

### *Conceptual Categories: Gender and Identity*

Identity issues are addressed in different ways but gender equality is the main frame of reference. Working with 'women' as an identity provided the leadership the means to intervene across different caste groups, and in few cases also across religions. To enter the private domain (of the family), and the public (community structures like caste panchayats), to challenge caste or religious leadership, and to engage with State institutions, positioning themselves as leaders speaking for women's interests and rights allowed them greater leverage.

### *Capacity Building*

The study shows that while opportunities and space for reflection and perspective building have been critical in creating this cadre of women leaders, these have been steadily shrinking to cover only project-driven inputs.

### *Power and Collective Functioning*

The Kafila model, with a leader who leads from the front, is the overarching image that the leaders evoked: a form of leadership that is intimate, personal and committed to mentoring and building a team of second-line leaders. Within the organisations, the meaning of 'collective' translates to promoting 'team work'. Teams have been useful in creating a pool of skills across a number of people who can then support each other. The study found that leaders had not given much thought to setting up internal structures.

### *Sexuality*

As women leaders who espouse principles of feminist politics, the leadership has had to confront issues of sexuality within the organisation and dealing with these has meant making visible power relations. This is an area where the leadership has had to struggle and is interested in inputs.

### *Importance of the Field*

The leader's command over the field contributes to their unique personas, creates credibility amongst the women in the community and within the organisation and provides the leadership the opportunity to work across caste, religion and ethnic identities.

### *Violence against Women*

Despite the gains made, new laws and policies on VAW that have come into play, there is a relentlessness about this work, as change on the ground remains bleak. The work of organisations on VAW is highly under resourced, and the quality and impact of their interventions on VAW need to be analysed in the light of this paucity of resources.

### *Resources*

Often, funders expect organisations to be mere implementers, who unquestioningly work on targets and outcomes determined by them. At points, leaders have had to modify their mandates, but many have struggled to survive, moving out of extractive funding relationships that run counter to their vision.

### *Relationship with the Women's Movement*

The organisations and leaders valued and recognised their relationship to the IWM: they viewed the IWM as holding the energy and flexibility to bring local level issues to the national stage and vice versa. For the leaders, the lack of knowledge of English excludes them from meaningful discourses and debates within the movement.

### *Women Leaders on the Front Line*

Although never seen as such, in the eyes of the IWM or the State, these leaders are located on the front line of the work on women's rights and development; at the point where the State, the women's movement and the community meet. They felt excluded from larger processes of policy formulation: all new policies, laws and programmes (on development, women's rights and so on) are advocated for by resource and advocacy groups working at the national and state level. Yet finally it was organisations like theirs that worked on the ground to make these a tangible part of people's lives. These organisations, and women, were the ones that left dealing with the everyday contestations, monitoring and implementation of the State's programmes and mandates with local bureaucracies and the community.

## **Recommendations**

### **Investing in building capacities of women-led organisations**

There is both a paucity of capacity-building interventions for these NGOs in general and the nature of interventions provided are largely adhoc, one-time and often ‘technical’ – focussed on specific issues or geared to assisting in better project implementation. We found that many women leaders had not even had the opportunity of undergoing rigorous gender trainings. Such organisations as covered by this study face complex challenges as they move from being small, working on single issues with simple organisational structures to having to deal with expansion and managing multiple projects. We thus recommend:

- Investments in building second-line women leaders working in smaller urban centres through sustained leadership development.
- Supporting intensive and rigorous gender trainings for staff of women-led organisations.
- Investment in the conceptualisation of organisational development programmes for women-led organisations that address needs of particular organisations and across organisations.
- Development of peer-learning exchanges between organisations, facilitated by individuals and organisations who have knowledge and expertise of working on women’s rights issues and organisational development.

### **Creation of spaces for learning and reflection**

Many of the leaders felt that there are no reflective spaces that go beyond issue-based inputs or project-related inputs. One of the areas that many organisations felt they had not discussed enough was identity and its linkages with gender issues. Secondly, many organisations felt while projects may be within their mandate, they are often developed elsewhere and they are called in as ‘implementing partners’.

- Leadership and learning institutes to be set up that focus on women leaders working outside of big metros, that combine theoretical inputs alongside reflections on their application in the field.
- Building of collaborative projects, where the projects not only deliver on targets but are reflective learning spaces.

- Creation of programmes or academies that build feminist theoretical knowledge that incorporate perspective building on different identity issues like caste, religion, ethnicity, sexuality, disability etc.

## **Resources**

The organisations studied were under-resourced and a large part of the time of first-line leaders is spent on raising resources. Secondly, the work of women-led organisations working outside the large metros is not well known. Thirdly, all the organisations were working on VAW but this was often poorly or non-funded. We therefore recommend that:

- Funding agencies build programmes that specifically support not just women's programmes but organisations led by women.
- Exchanges between women-led organisations and funders be organised to showcase the work being done.
- Fellowships combined with mentorship as a means of investing both financial and human resources should be supported.
- Concrete support for work being done on violence against women combined with a capacity building component.

## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

### The Cranes

Have you seen the flight of the cranes? It is believed that these graceful birds traverse long distances by transferring energy, leadership and strength to each other as they glide across the skies, forming an arrow as they fly. The tip steers the flock, and as the birds glide their way behind their leader, a wave of energy flows and multiplies through the flock allowing the trailing birds to fly more effortlessly, till the last ones simply spread their wings and float along with lyrical ease. Then, fresh and energetic to lead the way, as the front bird slips to the back, content to follow and receive her energies from the others.

Sushma Iyengar in Garva 2013: iv

The cranes and their flight symbolise the idea of collective leadership, on which feminist leadership too is based: the one who leads provides direction, powering others to move forward, creating ripples of energy. Leadership is cyclical and those who are last in line are as capable of leading, representing the idea of shared power and ability. From the stark, icy and grey landscape of Siberia, the cranes move towards the arid, warm and green grasslands of Kutch. And this is a journey that they return to year after year, similar to the journeys women's organisations make, covering inhospitable territories, roosting for a bit before confronting a new challenge.

From the Seventies onwards we see certain ideas, movements and interventions emerging that influence how women's leadership is understood and imagined. For instance, the collective aspect of women's leadership is an important qualifier for feminist activists, rooted in the experience of the power of collectives in mobilising for change, which has been at the heart of the women's movement in India. Leadership in this context is not individual centred and more democratic in its sharing of power. In the present study, an exploration of the nature of leadership practised by women from *kasbahs* (small towns) and rural areas, who head organisations working with rural women, these ideals of team work, shared power and participatory functioning repeatedly came up. The study looked at the exercise of leadership by women who have emerged from interventions made by feminist groups, Non-Governmental Organisations and by the State over the last few decades. We set out to explore in some depth the journeys of these leaders - women committed to transforming the lives of other women. What was their understanding of power and change? Were they feminist? And how did the long list of what is desirable of feminist leadership - that it is democratic, collective, transparent, inclusive and transformative - play out in the daily grind of running and leading an organisation? The latter was clearly more complex and less romantic than the inspiring formation of the cranes. Through quantitative data and indepth interviews with women leaders that probed

their class, caste and educational contexts, the issues on which they work, their organisational structures and functioning, we examined the nature and forms of leadership that are practised.

The following section looks at the context within which the idea of women's leadership has gained currency in the Indian context.

## **Locating Women's Leadership in the Indian Context**

Building women's leadership has not only been a concern of the women's movement in India; more recently it has received considerable attention from a variety of actors – the State, NGOs, donors and international agencies (List 2015).<sup>3</sup> However, in our view, in the Indian context the push for women's leadership has emerged primarily from two sites: the women's movement and the Indian state. With the emergence in the Seventies of the autonomous women's movement, issues of violence, health, environment and the rights of women workers erupted in the public domain through protest, legal reform, public and street campaigns (Kumar 1993; Gandhi and Shah 1992). In contrast to political party affiliated women's groups that existed prior to the Seventies, the autonomous women's movement was named to mark its independence from political parties or the State.

Women Studies departments – referred to as the academic arm of the movement - were set up in the Eighties, providing academics the opportunity to engage with these movements to produce pioneering work. Their work filled an important gap as it created knowledge on women, brought into focus women's participation and role in other movements in addition to those related specifically to women's rights and entitlements (Sen 1990; Sharma 2005). Urban women aligned with rural women's struggles for land, wages and forest rights. Resource groups, women's publishing houses, scholars and activists came together to document and produce collections related to women's writings, their struggles, their social and economic status in post-Independence India (Tharu and Lalitha 1991; Bagchi 2005). This has, over the past three decades, led to the emergence of leaders in the movement, who through their own struggles, writings, research, advocacy and action have come to occupy a significant position and persona as the voice of the movement (Menon 2011).

The leadership of the movement in the Seventies and Eighties thus came to be dominated by women from urban India, the big metropolises, with many academics, lawyers, journalists and film makers and artists joining and recording their experiences as part of

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<sup>3</sup> Inga Marie List (2015) underlines this interest and lists some important interventions. She points to young women being favourites as targets for leadership inputs, as seen in the *Nudge Leadership Challenge* (2015), +Acumen ([www.plusacumen.org](http://www.plusacumen.org)) and Women Deliver's (2015) *Young Leaders Program*. The Ford Foundation, a prominent funder of women's leadership programmes, states that it 'supports visionary leaders and organisations on the frontlines of social change worldwide', and the Global Fund for Women (2015) identifies 186 of their projects as contributing to 'leadership development.'

the autonomous women's movement. Even in the case of organising grassroots women, Rao (1996) makes a similar observation regarding the class difference between the informal workers being organised in Bidi collectives and in collectives of stone quarry workers, and the middle-class activists who provided the trainings, information, bringing in knowledge resources in the form of technology, skills and building democratic processes.

These decades were also witness to the leadership of the movement engaging with the State, to highlight the existing contradictions between State policy and the situation on the ground. One of the most damning critiques of the post-Independence, welfarist model of development emerged in the report of the Committee on the Status of Women in India (*Towards Equality* - GOI 1974) that pointed to the accelerated decline in sex-ratio, increased gender gaps in economic participation and highlighted the marginalisation of women from development in virtually all domains. *Shramshakti* (1988), the Report of the National Commission on Self-Employed Women and Women in the Informal Sector brought home the invisibilisation of women's 'productive' work in economic matrices. Both *Towards Equality* and *Shramshakti* were moments where the Indian State proactively engaged with women activists and women studies departments in its formulation of women related policies and programmes. The leadership was, as a result, able to substantively demonstrate the inadequacies of the State to address the women's question and adopted a strategy of working both 'in and against the state' (Rai: 2008:5). The UN decade of Women (1975-85) provided legitimacy to issues related to women's exclusion from mainstream development, sexual violence, health and education and they became a part of the policy discourse in India. As a result of all this, in the late Eighties, the State adopted 'Empowerment' as its stated objective in visioning women's development programmes, which created the possibilities for this middle class, urban leadership to engage with rural women and women from kasbahs on a larger scale and in a more sustained manner.

More recent writings and discussions on this history (John 1996; Roy 2015) mark the Nineties as a watershed decade that witnessed the NGOisation of the Indian Women's Movement (IWM). For feminists, the willingness to engage with the State emerged from the recognition that the resources and the scale at which work with poor, rural, women was possible through this partnership, outweighed their critique of the State. With international aid agencies coming in and the Indian State moving towards a neo-liberal, market-driven growth model, the social sector and the development discourse was overrun with data collection, management of inputs and outcomes to achieve desired impact. The IWM saw the emergence of institutions and organisations initiated by women's groups that sought to gain focus and expertise in specific domains - legal, health or livelihoods. Many emerged as lead organisations, that went on to create national networks, alliances, conducted research, implemented projects and have been part of advocating with the state on policy

formulation and reform in the past two decades. The emergence of the professional expert in the domain of gender and women's issues has been critiqued by feminists as 'career feminism' (Menon 2004: 228): the battle for rights and justice is seen to have been taken over by the demands of global funding, bureaucratic modes of functioning and a nine-to-five working culture within NGOs.

However, explorations of leadership practices within feminist organisations contest this binary construction of leadership. The articulation of the decades preceding the Nineties as being the 'golden era' of the IWM, contrasted with its later avatar, classified as managerial, bureaucratic, instrumentalist and non-transformative is seen to be 'melancholic mourning', representing a 'fetishized attachment' to past modes of knowledge, action and consciousness (Roy 2015:111). While the co-option or depoliticisation of gender through the concept of 'mainstreaming' is cause for concern (Subrahmanian 2006: 113), it is important to underline the fact that there is a diversity of NGOs, working in different political, social and cultural contexts. Women-led NGOs also do not occupy a standardised space, and many represent the hybrid nature of the movement, combining rights-based work with women with work with the State or donors in the 'project' format available. This hybridity is also represented in the changing class, caste, religious and geographical location of the IWM's leadership. The question that has increasingly been debated within the movement too is 'who speaks for whom?' For much of its history, the leadership of the movement has been in the hands of upper and middle-class, educated, urban women - at times conceptualised as brahmanical feminism (Rege 1998). Yet, the last two decades are critical in the growth of new voices, new forms and sites where leadership has emerged within the movement. Dalit women (Rege 2011) Muslim women and rural women's collectives complicate the homogenising category 'woman', embedding it in the multiple structures of power identities that create gendered hierarchies. How much has this changed or transformed the nature of leadership in the IWM and the challenges and possibilities that emerge still need exploration.

### **The State, the Women's Movement and Empowerment**

The engagement of the IWM with the State in the last two decades - demanding accountability and simultaneously as part of State initiatives for women's development - has resulted in the creation of large federations and collectives of rural women and proliferated women's leadership at the grassroots level. Three key initiatives which saw the State and women's groups coming together are discussed briefly below: the 73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment and the reservation for women in locally elected bodies, the initiation of women's empowerment programmes and the promotion of Self Help Groups as a means of economic empowerment have been the sites for the emergence of different types of leadership. Women field animators or workers have been part of the design of mobilising rural women in these initiatives. NGOs have emerged or then expanded their operations to



include women-related projects in their organisations. It is in this cross-section of development workers that we can trace the emergence of a new leadership in the Nineties, that learns the ropes of organising women.

The Women's Development Programme in Rajasthan (1982) was one of the earliest State programmes with 'empowerment' as a key objective; it was a pioneering programme that brought the State, women studies departments and women's rights activists to work on creating an 'empowered' rural woman, as the animator in her village. The *Saathin* (friend) as she was called, most often came from a poor and marginalised community and went on to creating forums for women to identify and act on issues concerning them and access their entitlements from the State (Sawhney 1994, Mathur 2004). Mobilisation of rural women often led to contestations with structures of power, be it in the community, State or the family; it was these engagements between a cross-section of women from the urban centres, districts and the villages that the synergy for action and learning emerged. Buoyed by the initial success of WDP, the state went on to formulate the National Mahila Samakhya Programme (MS) (1989) that framed its objective as Education for Women's Equality. The core mandate of the programme was similar to WDP, to push a social transformation agenda, with women from poor, rural, marginalised groups taking the lead. MS too started with a *Sakhi* (friend) like the *Saathin* in some states, but in others it shifted to working at the village level with a *Sangha* (collective), which was then accepted as the model for the programme. The *Sangha* or the women's collective was the forum that would enable rural women to challenge their secondary status both in the private and public realm (Jandhyala 2012, Krishnamurty 2012).<sup>4</sup>

Over time, as women leaders at the, village, block and even district level emerged and actively engaged with the State, pressure grew from both State agencies and donors to quantify the nature of 'empowerment' and to tie it to short-term development goals of educational access, health services and monitoring of government schemes. Once identified with challenging gender roles and power hierarchies and building women's leadership to identify their own issues, empowerment now became a linear process of inputs and outputs, thereby becoming divested of its political edge, raising questions on the key mandate itself (Gurumurthy and Batliwala in Ramachandran and Jandhyala 2012). It was not only a question of what the implications of the changing definition of empowerment meant for organising rural women, it had implications for the *Saathins*, the block and district-level workers and project leaders, whose skills and leadership abilities were put to the services of the State. While there is some work on the implications for rural women, regarding how the autonomy of their federations and groups was challenged with the State

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<sup>4</sup> Nationally 14,41,928 women are members of women's collectives and 325 federations have been established by Mahila Samakhya. (Mahila Samakhya 2014: A National Review. Ravi J. Matthai Centre for Educational Innovation, Indian Institute of Management, Ahmedabad. November 2014)

determining the outcomes of these programmes, its impact on how women workers were to perform for the State has not been documented (Kapadia 2002, Chakravarti 2006). By the time of the Tenth Five Year Plan,<sup>5</sup> the space for women to challenge inequities as part of government initiatives was shrinking and by the Twelfth Five Year Plan, the MS programme was subsumed under the State's Universalisation of Elementary Education programme. Some of the women field workers at the district and block level, empowered by their experiences of working with rural women, were not contained within the State discourse on delivering development and moved out to set up their own organisations and NGOs, emerging as leaders in their own right. Many of the women leaders in this study are part of this history and their introduction to feminist ideas has been through their work in these programmes.

The 73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment to the India Constitution in 1992 provided constitutional status to Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs), and, additionally, reserved 33 % of all PRI seats for women.<sup>6</sup> The Act was seen as a step by the State to bring close to a million women into decision-making roles. The possibility provided an impetus to civil society organisations to develop and run leadership courses, trainings and workshops for elected PRI members, to familiarise them with the system (The Hunger Project 2008-2009).<sup>7</sup> Despite grim pronouncements regarding the outcome of reservations yielding women as 'puppet' candidates (Nirantar 2007a), case studies and research showed that there were women at the grassroots who worked in both democratic and autocratic ways in their elected avatars to push for development work and schemes in their PRIs (Datta 1998, Duflo and Chattopadhyay 2004). Unlike the Sathins and the registered federations of Sangha women, the Elected Women Representatives (EWRs) demanded a different engagement by the State and NGOs. First, this was not a stable group: with elections every five years the women changed and the cycle of inputs, trainings and investment in the new round of leaders had to be restarted. As a result, the engagement of State-based institutions with EWRs was more in the nature of equipping them to deal with their new role through

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<sup>5</sup> Post-Independence India saw the emergence of the Planning Commission, which set out economic plans on a five-year cycle, with the first plan period covering 1951-1956. As the India economy opened up in the Nineties, the Five-Year plans moved to focusing on allocations by the central government to state governments, on schemes and social sector allocations. A total of 12 plans have been developed. However, the newly elected government in 2014 dismantled the Planning Commission and set up the NITI Aayog, whose role is being redesigned as a 'think tank' with representation from different state governments. It no longer has the power to make financial allocations

<sup>6</sup> Panchayati Raj is a system of local governance, which covers three levels of administration – at the village, block and district level. The Act made elections to these bodies mandatory and provided financial resources and powers to this system in an effort to decentralize planning and decision making.

<sup>7</sup> Many state governments across India in the early Nineties involved state training institutes to run training programmes for EWRs. These focussed on providing information on the processes of functioning of a Panchayat and on schemes that were in operation in their areas. In sharp contrast to this is the exemplar training module developed by the Hunger Project titled *The Women's Leadership Workshop - Vol 1 and II: A Trainer's Manual* (2008 – 9), India, combines ideas of citizenship, inequality and gender as part of the training.

information and confidence building. Building a political perspective on women's subordination and their role in decision making at the local level was not core to the leadership inputs provided. Studies also pointed to the persistence of gender hierarchies within the functioning of elected bodies, with male members circumscribing the roles and power of EWRs (Everett 2008 and Strulik 2008).

The mid Nineties were also witness to the Self Help Group (SHG) phenomenon that unfolded on a national scale and sought to address poverty alleviation through making access to credit available to women.<sup>8</sup> This 'collective' of women in SHGs was most often a forum where individual women could pool their savings together – qualitatively different from the Sangha of the MS programme or the collective that represented groups of women, outside of State programmes that were struggling for justice, equity and entitlements. While there are multiple axes along which an analysis of the phenomenon can be undertaken, we would like to focus on the issue of leadership of SHG groups and federations. In a related quantitative study examining the nature of links between education, literacy and SHGs (Nirantar 2007b), the analysis traced the women who were in leadership in these groups and federations. The data indicated that there was 'a direct and positive relationship between literacy and opportunities for group leadership.' (Ibid: pp 45-46).<sup>9</sup> The study also underlined the fact that, while the State claimed that this intervention was designed for women belonging to the most marginalised sections, those who were active were women from Other Backward Castes (OBCs),<sup>10</sup> which is a socially and economically mobile group and belonged to the majority community; they were mostly Hindu. The class and caste dimensions of membership and more importantly of leadership in SHG groups and federations were different from the MS Sanghas that focused on

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<sup>8</sup> A study conducted in 2007 (Nirantar 2007b), estimated that the Women and Child Department accounted for more than 10 Lakh groups, the Rural Development Department for 17.41 Lakh SHGs, formed by the Swarna Jayanti Gram Swarozgar Yojana (SGSY), while the National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development (NABARD) was involved in sponsoring of 15.2 Lakh SHGs over the past 12 years. 90% of these SHGs were solely women's groups.

<sup>9</sup> While the average literacy rate of the [SHG] is 39%, the average literacy rate among women coming into leadership is 69%... Literate women in leadership positions get most of the capacity building opportunities... [they are] likely to hold positions of leadership in panchayats or in initiating interventions related to Panchayats.' (Nirantar 2007b: 45-46)

<sup>10</sup> Other Backward Castes (OBCs) is an official categorisation used by the Government of India to identify groups that are socially and educationally disadvantaged. Each state government identifies the OBC castes and makes provisions for reservation of these groups in educational and state institutions. At present the population of OBCs is 41% according to the National Sample Survey (NSSO) data. This classification is a contested one, with many communities seeking admission into this group to avail of state benefits, despite belonging to economic and politically powerful groups. In the caste hierarchy, the OBCs are higher up in the ladder of social and economic status in comparison with the Scheduled Castes.

Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe women.<sup>11</sup> Women with some access to education are generally from castes and communities that occupy socio-economic privilege in rural India. Their participation in initiatives for economic empowerment helps them leverage their position to gain greater advantages and benefits in schemes, whether in terms of larger loan amounts, greater possibilities of starting new enterprises, opportunities for capacity building or then decision-making power in the federation structure. Given that the above study indicated negligible investment by the State in capacity building of these groups, the leadership in the SHGs therefore built on the positional status and resources of the class and caste identities.

## **The Rationale of the Study**

Thus we see a pattern of leadership in the IWM and the development sector; at one end a dominance of urban women from metropolitan cities who come with the privileges of educational and professional training, if not class/caste privilege, and at the other end grassroots women or women whose experiences, initiatives and struggles populate pamphlets, films, case studies and research related to women's leadership.

There is one section of women that is by and large absent from these representations and articulations of leadership both within the movement and outside: the women who have emerged as leaders through the process of mobilising grassroots women. These are women from working-class families, located in villages, kasbahs and in small towns, with limited educational qualifications; often entering this domain to bolster household or personal crises. Many emerged as skilled community mobilisers through the course of their work with NGOs and government programmes. Some moved out to set up their own organisations, becoming leaders themselves and initiated work in new areas with rural women. They are 'uncelebrated gender machineries' who became the 'intermediaries of change, who often suffer from an enormous burden of expectations ... in environments often resistant or immune to ideas of social change' (Subrahmanian 2006: 120).

The *Pracheta* in the WDP, or the *Sahayogini* in MS (both middle-level workers, the eyes and ears of the programme on the ground) exist as shadowy presence, the thread that pulls poor, rural women together, 'mobilises', organises them. In the documentation and evaluation of these programmes, the focus is primarily on the activities and actions taken by the collectives thus organised, in accessing rights and entitlements and their impact and achievements. There is rarely any attention paid to the journeys and struggles of the women leaders who made this possible.

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<sup>11</sup> The Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs) are official designations given to various groups of historically disadvantaged people in India. The terms are recognised in the Constitution of India and the various groups are designated in one or other of the categories.

In a rare article, L. Krishnamurthy (in Ramachandran and Jandhyala 2012) explores how women working with the MS programme – both the Sahayoginis and the Sangha women - negotiate and articulate some key feminist ideas related to equity and empowerment in their own lives and homes, their own vocabulary and strategies to communicate and assert these ideas. Yet, even here, the Sangha women and the Sahayoginis merge into one broad category, with no layering of how the class and caste status of the Sahayogini makes her experience distinct or specific. Apart from this one lone piece in a collection on MS, there is no serious exploration of the life world of the women who work to translate the programme's objectives into reality. Some Sahyoginis have moved on to register their own organisations, but this too has been experienced as an exit, rather than an expansion of the approach and vision of the programme to new districts and regions. And once they leave their parent organisations, they virtually seem to disappear. It is this vanishing thread that the present research study picks up on.

In literature that records the nature of collectives that have emerged independent of State programmes, we see a similar invisibilisation of the activists who are part of the journey of grassroots women organising for change. The work of Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA) with women in the unorganised sector is amongst the most documented case studies of the success of women organising for change.<sup>12</sup> Be it their work with the *bidi* (indigenous cigarettes) workers union in Madhya Pradesh or then the garment workers or pavement dwellers, the focus is on the nature of organising and how the collective built itself despite multiple challenges within and in the external environment (Kabeer, Sudarshan and Milward 2013; Rao 1996; Rose 1996). Those who are involved in building, supporting and strategising on these complex and multiple fronts are invariably described as 'facilitators', and there is little or no analysis of how these facilitators made change happen; if there is an iconic leader then she might be profiled in some detail. Even amongst Non Governmental Organisations, that work with women on development issues of health, education, etc the staff is predominantly female. They too are absent in the documentation or descriptions of the achievements and challenges that the organisations construct. In more recent, yet limited research available in the Indian context exploring the nature of leadership and issues involved in women's organisations that are funded, the focus has been on more urban based organisations in the big cities, some of whom are part of a longer history of work with women, that have networks and alliances with other groups in the city and are active in advocacy work at the state or national level (Roy 2011; List 2015).

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<sup>12</sup> Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA) was established in 1972 by the iconic leader Ela Bhatt in the city of Ahmedabad, organising women in the garment sector and over the past four decades has expanded to rural areas and also to other states. SEWA recorded in 2008 a membership of 950,000 members and is the largest union in the country.

In India, on the one hand there is concern regarding the mushrooming of NGOs post the Eighties (Biswas 2006), yet women-led organisations, especially in rural areas are few. While there are several State and NGO-led programmes targeting women, the investment in building women-led local institutions is under-resourced and the required support for their leadership and institutional development is mostly non-existent. The nature of women's leadership practices and the challenges they face is under-researched. Not much is known about the backgrounds and journeys of women leaders who are outside the big metropolis and are located in rural and semi-urban areas. What is their political or developmental vision? In a sense, this group of women represents the outcomes of the ideals and action of the IWM, whether directly or indirectly. As the development of leadership snowballs into becoming the buzzword for the next decade, the question is whether we are working on a clean slate, with efforts to *bring* women into leadership where there are none? Are the current interventions in leadership development, particularly efforts at capacity building, based on any understanding of practices that exist on the ground? If there are women leaders, even if small in number, who are not from the big metropolis, but have emerged from different class and caste backgrounds, or then are tribal or Muslim, what are the ways in which they have become leaders, exercised power and built their organisations?

## Study Design and Methodology

This study seeks to fill this gap in knowledge about the leadership practices of women in some North Indian states whose journeys began from rural and semi-urban contexts and whose work continues with rural women, located in the district or block, in a new avatar - that of a Non Governmental Organisation (NGO). It attempts to document and analyse some of the strategies, the experience and the life world of these leaders.<sup>13</sup>

### Research Questions

1. What are the leadership practices of women leaders from rural, peri-urban and smaller cities, who work in rural-based NGOs in North India?
2. What are socio-economic backgrounds of these women leaders and how have they come to occupy positions of leadership? What factors have impacted their leadership practices and shaped the vision of the organisations they lead?
3. How do the leadership practices of this group of women relate to prevailing understandings of feminist leadership?

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<sup>13</sup>The precise manner in which rural, semi-urban and urban centres is used in this study is explained in the section on selection criteria. Wherever the phrase women leaders or women's leadership practices is mentioned hereafter it refers to this specific group of women leaders and organisations that are the focus of this study.

## **Some Key Concepts: Framing Feminist Leadership**

Feminist leaders are motivated by fairness, justice, and equity and strive to keep issues of gender, race, social class, sexual orientation, and ability at the forefront.... The elements particular to a feminist leadership construction include a focus on both individual and micro-level and societal or macro-level social justice concerns, a desire to bring marginalised voices to the centre of the conversation, and a willingness to take risks as one strives to enact a transformative agenda.

Tracy Barton, in S Batliwala 2011:10

The study uses key concepts that have been important in feminist theory and practice to understand the leadership practices of women leaders. These include power, collectivising, democratic functioning, equality, public and private, bodily integrity, stratification and transformation. The study examines how a smaller and particular sub-set of women NGO leaders and their organisations engage with these concepts at the levels of conceptual understanding, experience and praxis and, institution building and organisational processes. Further, an important consideration for our research has been to adopt a grounded approach: we engage with the complexities of the relationships between individuals and organisations and not with leadership qualities, in abstract terms. Our study therefore does not provide typologies of women's leadership practices or women's organisations; nor do we attempt to highlight success (or failure) stories; we also do not seek to come up with 'how to build women's leadership' check list.

The complexity and the multiple sites at which leadership works often results in complicated and elaborate definitions of this phenomenon. It can be overwhelming for a leader to further attempt at locating whether their leadership is feminist or not. Batliwala describes this as a tough proposition even for researchers and aptly describes attempts in this direction as 'nailing the jelly to the wall' (Batliwala 2011: 4). She does however provide a comprehensive framework for defining feminist leadership, harvesting learnings from previous decades of work on building feminist leadership. We draw on some of these ideas, as well as others, to frame the study's understanding of feminist leadership.

One key concept is that leadership is not a value but a process and a practice. As a result we seek to map the shifts and changes in leadership practices over time, rather than extracting leaders' views on leadership at a particular moment. It is in the daily acts of working, planning, training and prioritising that leadership practices need to be analysed and the contradictions and dilemmas between stated values and the lived world of leadership emerges in our view.

Another central concept is power: the exercise of power is at the heart of both feminism and of leadership. The different domains of power that are included are 'visible, hidden and invisible power' (Veneklasen and Miller in Batliwala 2011: 17). 'Visible' is the explicit domains of power, be it institutions like the police, the judiciary, the state, corporate or

even organisations. Hidden power alludes to agenda-setting power, the power to influence or then determine issues behind the scenes, without explicitly taking lead. The third is indirect power, where mindsets or then attitudes are reiterated or then challenged, leading to the creation of opinions, views or ways of seeing the world around one.

We combine this concept of power with another concept that has been at the heart of feminist critique – the idea of the public and the private (Pateman 1989). For the purposes of this study, the public is explored in the context of the public persona of the women leaders and their approach to dealing with institutions. In the private realm, we will explore the internal world of the leader, the organisation. While there is a formal space within which organisations exist, gossip and judgment are notorious aspects of the world in which NGOs operate and organisational matters are typically seen and understood to be ‘private’. Therefore, we analyse the less articulated, hidden world of organisations, the internal conflicts and struggles, and how women leaders straddle or make links between the public and private domains.

We borrow from feminist standpoint theory (Harding 2004) to discuss the leaders’ processes of functioning, decision making and handling the field. The women leaders’ locations – gender, caste, class, geography – are their source of knowledge. Here, the creation of knowledge and resources is based on work by and for women. However, Standpoint theory moves beyond knowledge that is created, to probe beneath the dominant discourse and generate critical awareness regarding *the way* we know about things. In this study, we look at the ability of this leadership to move beyond mainstream notions of women’s equality to create a transformative vision for others.

A major problem with a term like ‘feminist’ is that it has a context of its own, which sometimes women leaders are aware of, but often not. Whether they considered themselves feminist was an important question for us as researchers. The question drew three kinds of responses. One was an unambiguous acceptance that they were feminist in their thinking and their work. This reflected a familiarity with other women’s organisations and the women’s movement. The other was a qualified identification, that expressed anxieties regarding what the term ‘feminist’ represented to them - as an ideology that urban, upper-class women with strong separatist views subscribed to. The third was where the leader had no clue about the term and on being explained promptly stated, ‘Absolutely, this is what I am. I abhor the word *bechari* (victim), not only for myself but also for other women. I am not a *bechari*. I earn and feed myself, I do not go begging to others to support me.’ However, since we looked at leadership as a process, claims one way or the other were more reflective of a context and experience rather than a judgement of where they belonged.



## Overview of Study Design

Table 1 below shows the phases and timelines of the study, both quantitative and qualitative components.

TABLE 1: Timeline of Study

<b>Phase 1</b> (June 2013 – August 2013 - Qualitative)	Developing research design and methodology, development of tools, identification of partners
<b>Phase 2</b> (August to December 2013 - Qualitative)	Field testing, training of field researchers, fieldwork, collective workshop with research partners (December 2013)
<b>Phase 3</b> (January – June 2014)	Data entry, analysis of data
<b>Phase 4</b> (July to October 2014)	Report writing and internal revisions
<b>Phase 5</b> (November 2014 – February 2014)	National consultation for presentation of draft study findings (November 2014); Revision based on feedback
<b>Phase 6</b> (March 2015 – August 2015)	External peer review and final revisions report and finalisation

This study was carried out in three North Indian states - Rajasthan, Uttarakhand and Uttar Pradesh and is primarily a qualitative study, but includes a quantitative component. It seeks to answer the questions posed above by drawing on the qualitative data gathered through research carried out with eight NGOs and 24 first and second-line leaders from these NGOs. Quantitative data was gathered to frame the findings of the qualitative study and to map the broader field of women leaders and women-led NGOs located in rural, semi-urban and urban centres, using data gathered from 71 NGOs and 150 women leaders across the three states. The qualitative study provides textured data highlighting particularities related to the nature of women's leadership and unpacks the relational aspects of leadership practices, organisational process and structures; the quantitative data provides an overview of the landscape of women-lead NGOs. Wherever relevant we have related the findings of both studies but do not compare the data sets. The overall study was anchored by a core group of four researchers, who undertook the qualitative study.

### *Selection of States*

The study was undertaken in three states of North India – Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh and Uttarakhand. The states were selected as they present diverse contexts, with regard to achievements as per development indicators, as well as the nature of development and women's empowerment programmes and people's movements. The attempt was that a heterogeneous pool of organisations, issues and socio-economic and political contexts could be studied. The study has not sought to identify state-wise variations, but the state-

level contexts were taken into consideration while analysing the qualitative and quantitative findings. Some of these contextual details are outlined below.

In terms of development indicators both Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh find themselves at the bottom of most development league tables, with Uttarakhand faring better. Presented below are some select socio-economic and development data.

Table 2: State-wise data as per development indicators

Category	Source	National	Uttar Pradesh	Rajasthan	Uttarakhand
<b>Population in %</b>					
Scheduled Caste	Census 2011	16.6	20.7	17.8	18.8
Scheduled Tribe	Census 2011	8.6	0.57	13.48	2.89
Muslim	Census 2001	13.4	18.5	8.5	11.9
<b>Education (%)</b>					
Female literacy	Census 2011	65.46	59.26	52.66	70.70
Rural female literacy	Census 2011	58.75	55.61	46.25	66.79
Scheduled caste female literacy	Census 2011	56.50	48.91	44.66	64.06
Gender Parity Index or enrolment rates (Primary)	DISE (2008-09)	0.94	0.98	0.87	0.93
Drop out rates (Upper Primary)	TNS India Survey (for EdCil) 2013	2.2	1.5	2.2	0.8
Maternal Mortality (per 100,000 live births)	RGI (SRS)*	178	292	255	292
Sex ratio (Census 2011)	Census 2011	943	912	928	963

\* Sample Registration System (SRS), Registrar General of India (RGI-SRS)

Since the mid-Eighties, Rajasthan has pioneered a number of important government programmes, often implemented in partnership with NGOs, notably the Women's Development Programme.<sup>14</sup> Women's organisations in the state have been at the forefront of national campaigns on issues of violence and women like sati (the practice of widows immolating themselves on their husband's pyre) harassment and rape that brought together women's groups to agitate for law reforms. More recently it has been home to various rights based campaigns related to information, food and work.

<sup>14</sup>Well-established NGOs like Sewa Mandir and Astha in Udaipur, SWRC in Tilonia, URMUL in Bikaner, amongst others, led the way in the Seventies and Eighties to create new strategies of working with rural communities. Innovative educational programmes were designed to tackle low school participation, like the Shiksha Karmi Programme and Lok Jumbish as collaborations between the State and NGOs. In the last two decades, several rights-based campaigns involving participation of networks and organisations like the Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan (based in Rajsamand district) have led to important national legislations like the Right to Information and the Right to Work.

Driven by claims of developmental neglect and exploitation by political powers vested in the plains of Uttar Pradesh, the hill districts of Uttar Pradesh saw a strong movement for statehood in the Nineties. The movement brought together development and rights-based groups, and political parties to highlight issues of environmental degradation, deforestation and lack of development in the hill region. After a long struggle, the state was carved out of Uttar Pradesh in 2000. In Uttarakhand, Gandhian organisations, mostly headed by men, have dominated the state with their delivery-oriented work with the poor in rural areas, since Independence. But the region has been home to several environmental movements, some significantly led by grassroots women, such as the Chipko Movement in the Seventies,<sup>15</sup> the anti-Dam struggle of the Eighties and Nineties and anti-alcohol and forest rights struggles. These movements inspired an entire generation of activists in the women's and the environment movement (Kumar 1993, Guha 2000, Sharma 2009, Pathak 1985).

Uttar Pradesh stands somewhat apart from the other two states, as a late starter in terms of the NGO sector (except for male-headed Gandhian organisations) and people's movements. However, since the late Eighties and Nineties, there has been a mushrooming of developmental NGOs alongside the emergence of more progressive women's groups and a smaller community of organisations that began taking on issues of violence and more rights-based work.<sup>16</sup> Of greater significance in UP is the emergence of Dalit rights groups and the mobilisation of the Dalit community from the mid-Nineties. UP has been at the centre of major caste and communal political conflagrations with the rise of political mobilisation amongst Dalits and other backward castes and a wider recognition of identity politics within civil society organisations.<sup>17</sup> This has also led more recently to debates

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<sup>15</sup>The Chipko (meaning embrace) Movement in the hill districts of UP was a movement resisting the destruction of forests named 'chipko' as its main resistance strategy was for women to hug trees, to prevent contractors, forest officials and even men in their own families from felling of trees for commercial use. While the leaders of the movement are often stated as being noted Gandhian activists Sunderlal Bahuguna and Chandi Prasad Bhatt, it is a well-established fact that the mainstay of the movement were village women.

<sup>16</sup>An example is the Hisaab (*Hinsa Sahna Band* or Stop Tolerating Violence), the campaign against violence against women, which was launched in November 2000, by the network of autonomous women's organisations in Uttar Pradesh.

<sup>17</sup>The Mandal Commission (established in 1979 by the ruling Janata Party government) recommended several affirmative action interventions for Other Backward Classes (OBC) Scheduled Castes (SC) and Scheduled Tribes (ST) including increasing quotas (from 27% to 50%) for these groups in government jobs and public universities. Widespread anti-reservation protests by upper castes, especially university students continued throughout the Nineties after VP Singh, the Prime Minister at the time, tried to implement its recommendations in 1989.

The demolition of the Babri Masjid, a 16th-century mosque in Ayodhya, Uttar Pradesh, and the campaign leading up to it, has been at the centre of communal tension (between Hindus and Muslims) since the Eighties. Throughout the Eighties and early Nineties right-wing Hindu nationalist parties like the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) campaigned for the construction of a temple at the site, deemed to be the birthplace of god Rama. On 6 December 1992, a large crowd of Hindu Kar Sevaks (religious volunteers) destroyed the mosque in

around the need to understand the nature of leadership within organisations that identify as working with specific marginalised groups, namely Dalits and Muslims.

### *Selection of the Research Sample*

The three basic criteria that we used to select the participating organisations for both the qualitative and quantitative studies were:

*Women led:* The selected NGO must be led by a woman or a group of women in *practice*. In the case of mixed gender leadership, the women must *actively* play a leadership role in terms of decision making and performing other leadership functions. The emphasis on practice was critical and necessary to exclude organisations that stated that they had a woman leader on paper but in reality the woman was not performing that role.

*Location of the organisation and leader's background:* The selected organisation must be located in rural, semi-urban areas, and small cities that were non-metro cities. While there are several definitions of rural and urban and urban centres are classified in different ways, in this study we have followed the Census (2001) definition based on population.<sup>18</sup> Further, the NGO had to be working in rural areas and self-identify as being a predominantly rural-based organisation. Similarly the women leaders should be from rural and small town backgrounds and should continue to have active roots in these areas.

*Nature of organisation and work:* The selected NGO should identify working on women's empowerment, development and rights (however defined) as one of its core mandates. It should have been in operation for at least 3 years, be registered and funded. While we recognised that several informal, volunteer-based organisations or forums are doing impressive work, for this study we wanted to focus on those organisations that are engaged in undertaking projects, raising funds (however small) and thus employing staff (however few or many) and the issues and challenges that women leaders of such organisations faced.

The quantitative data from the present study shows a steady rise in the registration of women-led NGOs: while only 2.9 % of the organisations surveyed were registered in 1981; the figure rises marginally to 8.8 % for the Eighties, and then very sharply to 44.1% in the Nineties and 42.7% in the first decade of the 2000s. Thus over 80% of the women-led organisations surveyed were established between 1991 and 2010.

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the presence and instigation of senior leaders of the VHP and BJP. This resulted in several months of rioting between Hindus and Muslims in several cities across the country including Mumbai.

<sup>18</sup> According to this definition, a 'rural centre' has a population of upto 9,999; 'semi-urban' from 10,000 to 99,999; urban centre from 100,000 to 999,999; and a 'metropolitan centre' are those cities which have populations above 1000,000.

Though a common selection criteria was used for both the qualitative and quantitative studies, we employed these in different ways to identify organisations - for the quantitative study we used a snowballing technique to identify as many NGOs that fitted the above criteria and for the qualitative study it was a purposive sample chosen to reflect the contextual diversities described above.

### **The Quantitative Study**

The specific objectives of the quantitative study were - to develop a socio-economic profile of women leaders; gather basic information regarding the organisation (date of starting, sectors and scale of work, scale and sources of funding; gathering basic information on internal functioning of the organisation.

We began the process of identifying organisations by locating directories but soon realised soon enough that no comprehensive lists of women's organisations were readily available and the information contained was often outdated or unreliable. We simultaneously focussed on gathering information from key informants - experienced people from the women's movement, development sector, policy analysts, donors, and networks at national, state and district levels- and through internet searches. This list was expanded through a snowballing process. The process was reliable as it enabled the researchers to cross check the information and by reaching out to multiple sources researchers were able to contact a wide pool of organisations.

The identified NGOs were contacted telephonically and some basic details were noted in a semi-structured format. These conversations also enabled us to weed out those organisations where women leaders were not really active. The final sample was selected from this list purposively, to ensure that all criteria were met. The sample consisted of 71 organisations, 23 each from Rajasthan and Uttarakhand and 25 from Uttar Pradesh, all of whom were visited by the research team. When the NGOs in the final list were mapped against the districts in each state we found that that they were spread unevenly. Several organisations were concentrated in a few districts (such as Ajmer in Rajasthan, Dehradun in Uttarakhand, and Varanasi in UP). We believe this reflects the reality that certain districts and locations have become hubs of NGO activity. Further, while it is possible that women's organisations are present in unrepresented districts and could not be identified through our method, it is more likely that women's organisations in these districts were either left out for not meeting some of the criteria - for example, is led by a women from big metros, or has been set up recently, or do not have any budgeted activities. Thus we believe the sample of 71 organisations to be a representative one, which includes nearly all women's organisations that fulfil our three basic criteria.

The process of defining criteria and sample selection was hotly debated. We confronted questions like: should we exclude an organisation that had a small office in the state capital,

but used it only as a liaison office and their main centre of work was at the district? Should we exclude a woman leader who had predominantly been brought up in small towns but may have spent a few years in a metro for higher education? While selecting women leaders, we cross checked factual information by additionally asking women how they identified themselves, to ascertain their 'sense' of their location. Looking at our final sample, we can say that the organisations we studied were primarily operating at the block and district levels, and the women leaders also hailed from these locations or smaller cities and all still had active rural links.

All the organisations were physically visited and data was gathered using structured and coded questionnaires. Two questionnaires were used – one was an individual questionnaire administered to 72 first-line and 61 second-line leaders,<sup>19</sup> where questions related to the leader's socio-economic background, professional background and milestones in the leadership journey were asked. The second questionnaire asked questions about the organisation (when it started, sectors of work, funding etc) and was filled out with the NGO heads. Organisational reports and supplementary material as available were also collected. Observations were documented descriptively.

### **The Qualitative Study**

The research process for the qualitative study was undertaken through a collaborative process of dialogue and engagement with the selected NGOs through workshops, individual interviews and collective reflection. The first phase of the qualitative study was to identify the participating organisations (three per state, although we were unable to complete the process with one in Rajasthan and so the final sample was of eight organisations) and to clarify the framework, methodology and to develop the tools. For the qualitative study too a range of key informants were contacted, and several discussions between the qualitative and quantitative teams to share information. In many cases the researchers used their own knowledge and information base having worked in those states for several years. The NGOs were selected so as to reflect the widest possible range of organisational structures, issues and socio-economic profiles of women leaders. After shortlisting, we sought agreement from the organisations through long telephonic or in-person conversations.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup>Some key informants pointed out their discomfort with the use of terms like first and second line/level/rung leaders, which according to them indicated hierarchy. The research team debated this issue and chose to use this terminology for two reasons - almost all organisations have clearly identified leadership tiers, and developing 'next' level leadership was a recurrent anxiety or challenge that was expressed. Thus rather than obfuscating this reality we have taken it on board and discussed it in the subsequent chapters of this report.

<sup>20</sup>Participating in the study entailed a time commitment: workshops with individual organisations; first and second-line leaders participated in a three-day collective analysis workshop; and participation in day-long national consultation. The initial conversation entailed us providing a detailed brief of the project as well as assuring full confidentiality. Finally the Rajasthan organisation that had agreed could not commit to the workshop dates.

## *Qualitative Research Tools*

The research team held three-day workshops with the organisations leadership and senior staff members to gather data on leadership practices. A set of interactive tools were developed which were administered with each organisation. The tools were developed in a workshop and the first organisational visit served as a field test as well. The tools used for the workshop with the organisations were as follows:

- *Understanding the organisation's history:* Through an interactive exercise, the researchers sought to gain an indepth understanding of the organisation's history, vision and how its structure and leadership had evolved over time.<sup>21</sup> A common set of questions was posed to all the organisations so that data on common parameters was gathered. Through this exercise we probed the nature of leadership practices as they intersected with the organisation's work and history. While doing this exercise organisations named projects and the sectors they worked in but the main purpose was to surface the evolution of the organisations and leaders conceptual understanding on these issues.
- *Understanding how leadership operates in the organisation:* In this exercise we asked organisations to provide examples of events - programmes, interventions, strategies, crises, cases or trainings - where staff members felt leadership had been displayed.
- *Individual interviews:* Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the heads of the organisations as well as the next level of women in leadership. The purpose of the interview was to trace the individual journeys of women, through different phases of their lives, as they have evolved to take on leadership roles. These proved useful in situating questions around leadership in a broader context: connections between different dimensions like the economic and social, individual and institutions, public and private could be made.
- *Collective workshop:* After the three-day workshop with each organisation, the research team did an initial round of processing and analysis of the data that emerged. This was shared back with the NGOs during a collective workshop where more in-depth discussions were held on certain themes for example on issues of power, sexuality, identity and democratic functioning.

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<sup>21</sup> The facilitators asked critical questions about each phase in the organisation's history that related to the work that was being done during that phase, the discourses that influenced the organisations work, the structure of the organisation; critical events; their perceptions of the external environment at the time; scale of work and the team; and internal structures and processes.

### ***A Note about the Researchers***

The study was anchored by a core group of four researchers. Foregrounding our location is important in a study of this nature as it involves interrogating the internal world of both the leader and the organisation. It is not merely a documentation of the work done by the organisation but involved candidly sharing experiences of challenges that emerge in the course of running organisations and these are not necessarily open to the public. All four of the core research team have led organisations, conducted or then been part of organisational development workshops and are intimately aware of the complex issues that women leaders confront. This enabled us to build trust and the women leaders shared experiences and information on these matters without the fear of being judged and exposed to the outer world. We would like to thank them for the honesty with which they shared their own practices of leadership.

The study was conceived and supported by Gender at Work and was implemented locally in collaboration with Sadbhavana Trust.

The quantitative study was conducted by researchers from CORD, a Delhi-based research organisation, with extensive experience of conducting field level research studies.

A final but critical point about the research process is that we guaranteed full confidentiality to the NGOs participating in the qualitative study. Thus, while we list the names of the participating organisations in Annexure 1 on page 132, in our description and analysis we have changed all names of organisations and individuals.

### **Structure of the Report**

The report is divided into four chapters. The first and second look at the women leaders of the profiled organisations at work. They paint the public and private, the external and internal worlds in which they practice their leadership. They look at the specific and patterns of challenges that women leaders face, with the rural women they work with, with the community and State they engage within their work, and within the organisations they have built over years. The third chapter zooms in further to the individual women leaders themselves: first drawing a socio-economic profile with the quantitative data in the study, and then presenting their life histories, tracing the transformative moments and experiences in their life which have influenced the leaders they have become. The final section draws some conclusions about the nature of feminist leadership, from the observations and conversations of the organisations and individuals in this study.



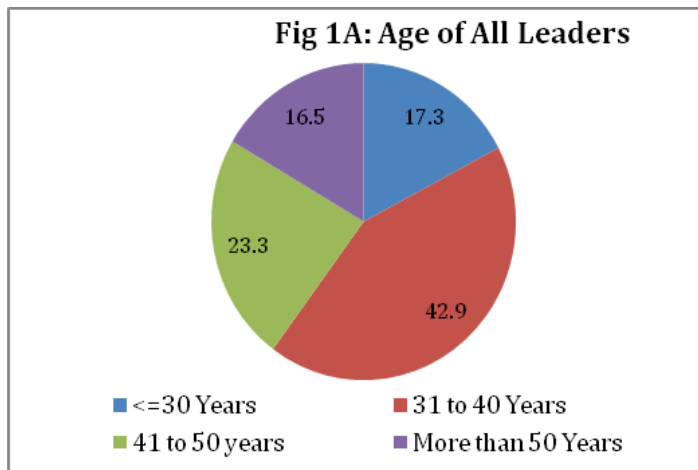
## CHAPTER 2: SOCIO-ECONOMIC PROFILES OF WOMEN LEADERS

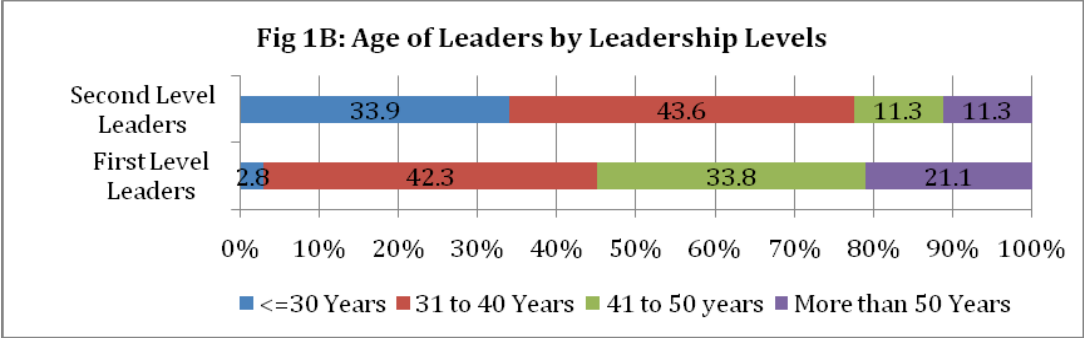
One of the purposes of this research study is to deepen our understanding of women NGO leaders who are located outside the large metro cities. What kind of socio-economic and educational backgrounds do such women leaders come from? What drew them to women's development work? What shaped their perspectives? What challenges did they negotiate to reach where they are today? This chapter seeks to answer some of these questions. The first part of the chapter is based on data collected from a survey of 150 women leaders and the second section uses the qualitative interview data.

### Who Are These Women Leaders? Profiles Based on the Quantitative Data

In order to build a profile of women leaders, the survey gathered data for the following categories: age, religion and caste, educational levels, marital status and leaders' family backgrounds (in terms of their parent's educational levels and occupational patterns). As mentioned earlier, the questionnaires were administered to the heads of the organisations as well as second-line leaders. The 'first-line' leaders refers to the heads of organisations who are mostly founders of organisations, and the 'second line' were those leading programmes, considered by the organisation to be the next in line with regard to taking on organisational responsibilities. As the sample per state is relatively small, inter-state comparisons have been made only where they point to a striking difference.

#### Age of Leaders

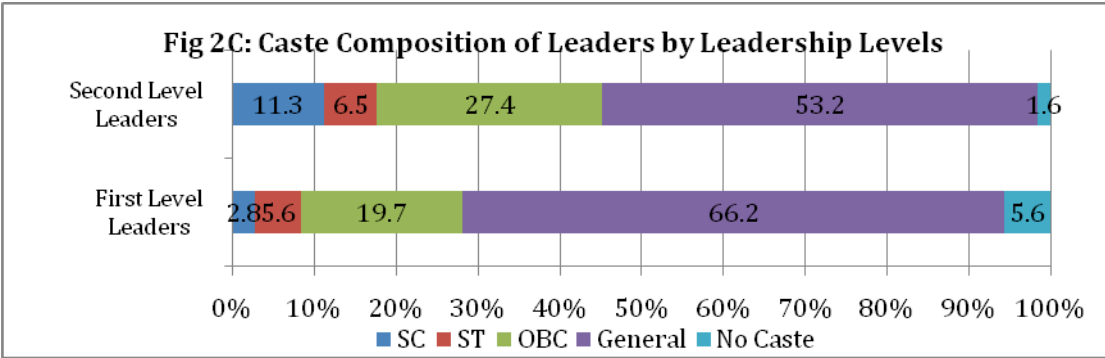
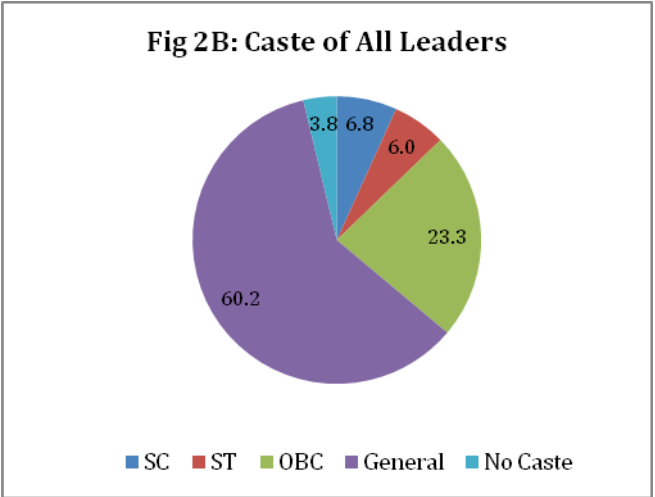
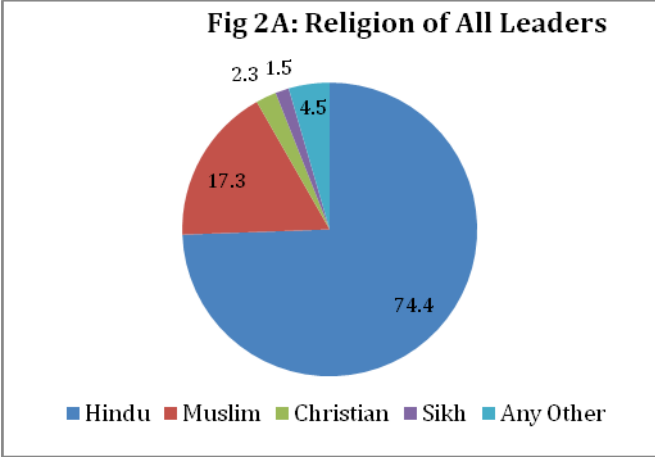




As figure 1A shows, 43% of the women leaders interviewed fall in the age group of 31-40 years. Not surprisingly, the second-line leaders were comparatively younger than the first-line leaders - one-third (33.9%) of the second-line leaders are 30 years or lower, as compared with 2.8% of first-line leaders. These figures indicate that the 30-40 age group is when women (first and second line) are most actively playing a leadership roles, as well as that there is an increasing space for younger women to play leadership roles within the organisations studied. The qualitative data offers two possible explanations: First, second-line leaders are those who have worked themselves up the organisation's ladder and the 30 - 40 age bracket is when they come into their own in terms of experience, confidence and maturity. Secondly, for the women who were married, and many in the sample had married very young, this point in women's life cycle is when they have completed their child-bearing and rearing responsibilities. Many women mentioned in their interviews that being an active leader required them to be out of the home for long hours, which was always difficult to balance with child-care responsibilities. They also talked about how the early years of marriage were often restrictive, with various controls over mobility and sexuality being exercised. As the next section will show, many leaders left violent marriages after many years of struggle, which then allowed them to gradually come into leadership roles.

**Social Background: Religion and Caste**

A majority (74.4%) of leaders in the sample were Hindus, which roughly corresponds to their population share (according to the Census 2011 Hindus comprised 80% of the population). The percentage of Muslims (17.3%) is a little higher than the percentage of Muslims in the population (national level). These findings also resonate with those of an interesting national level research study (Naqvi forthcoming) that examined the work being done by NGOs with Muslims. Surveying 359 NGOs across eight Indian states that had a Muslim population of 9% or more, the study found that 28% of the NGOs surveyed had women in leadership, and of this 15% had Muslim women in leadership. These findings seem to counter (tentatively as they are not in a majority) prevailing perceptions regarding Muslim women: of being outside the public domain.



The data shows that 60.2% of the women leaders belonged to so-called higher castes, or ‘general’ castes, who do not benefit from reservations; nearly one-fourth belonged to Other Backward Castes (OBCs).<sup>22</sup>The overall low representation of Scheduled Castes and Tribes (SC and ST) amongst the leadership is worth noting. The NGOs surveyed stated that they

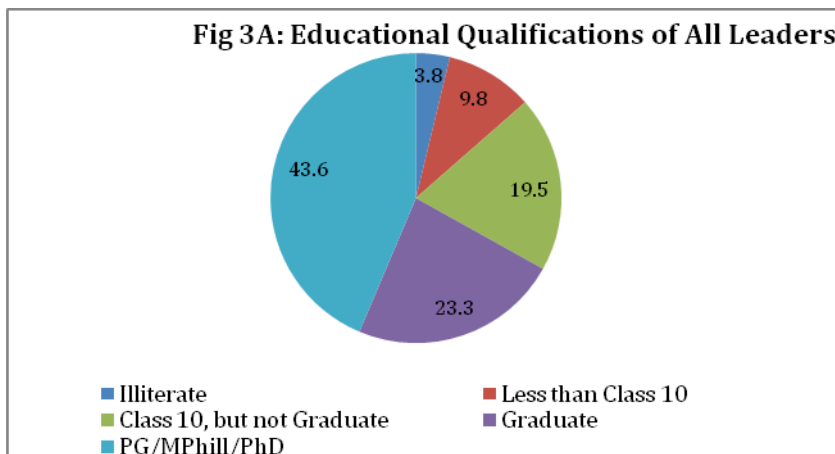
<sup>22</sup>For the quantitative study and in the data tables we have used the official government categories - Scheduled Caste, Scheduled Tribes etc. to avoid interpretational issues. However, in the qualitative study and in analysis, the political category of Dalits and Adivasis have been used.

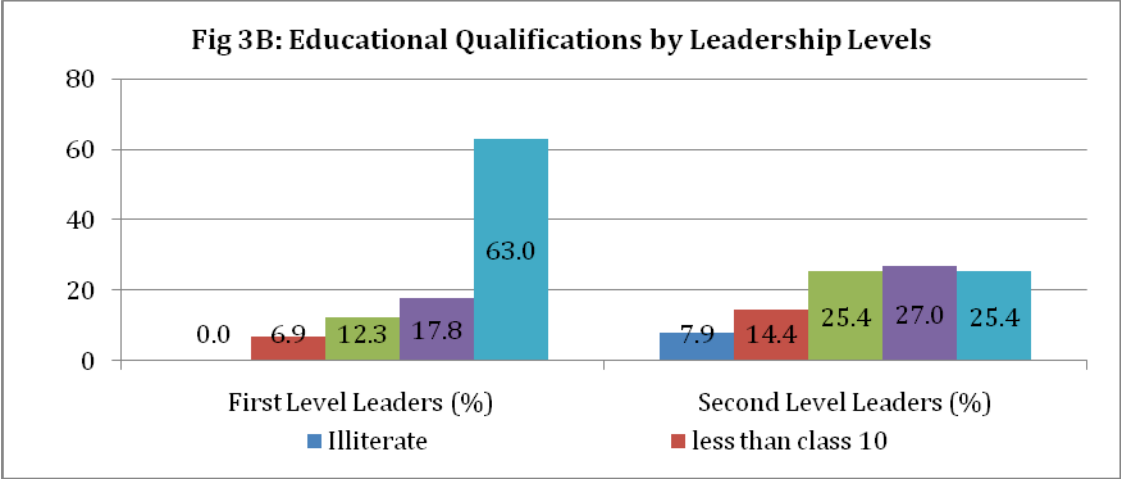
worked predominantly with these communities as they are also the most disadvantaged: 21% of organisations reported that their NGOs were started specifically to work with socially disadvantaged communities like Muslims, Dalits and Adviasis. However, one cannot rule out biases within organisations or the absence of measures to enhance formal participation of Dalits. This was evident from the composition of governing boards of the organisations - 43% of the governing boards did not have a single member from Dalit or Adivasi communities, 50% had no member from OBC communities and 54% had no Muslim members.

In terms of caste, we found significant inter-state differences. In Uttar Pradesh, Scheduled Castes constituted 17% of the leadership, in sharp contrast to the figure of 2.5% in Rajasthan. This finding resonates with the context laid out of the politicisation of Dalits and a greater presence of identity-based civil society organisations in UP.

Another striking finding was the difference in the caste profiles of first and second-line leaders. There is a far higher representation of women from Dalit and OBC communities at the second level. This data shows a shift in the caste representation in leadership, and points to an emerging leadership potential amongst women from disadvantaged communities. On one hand the high representation of Dalit women amongst the second-line leaders is reflective of deliberate strategising by the first-line leaders to provide opportunities to women to learn and grow and take on organisational responsibilities, as becomes evident from the qualitative data. This process of mentoring that women's organisations undertake was described in great detail (this is something we discuss in Chapter 6). On the other hand, it also reflects the reality that it is difficult for such women to actually come into first-line leadership due to low levels of education and social and cultural resources.

### Education and Leadership





*Well educated first-line leaders:* The overall picture suggests that the women leaders were well qualified: more than two-thirds (66.9%) were graduates or had higher qualifications. Educational qualifications of the leaders disaggregated on the basis of caste were along expected lines, with leaders from higher castes being educationally more privileged - 81.3% were graduates and above. Of the nine Dalit leaders, only two were educated above Class 12 and similarly among the 31 OBC leaders, only half were educated above class 12.

*Educational qualification not a barrier for second-line leaders:* This data suggests two interesting trends: on one hand, though education levels amongst the younger generations of Dalits and OBCs has increased in general, the low representation of women from these communities as revealed in the data suggests that they are not entering the development sector; and on the other hand, for those SC and OBC women who have entered this sector, the lack of higher education has not been a deterrent. The latter was corroborated by several of the interviews, where women talked of how they worked their way up the organisational ladder despite not having formal educational qualifications.

However, the differences in educational qualifications between first and second levels of leadership are sharp. 63% of the first-line leaders were post graduates and only 7% were not educated beyond Class 10. In contrast, amongst the second line, only 25% have a post-graduate degree and 14.4% have not studied beyond secondary education. Striking, however, was the fact that 7.9% of second-line leaders were illiterate or have rudimentary literacy skills. This disassociation between leadership with literacy and educational level, or in other words the fact that women with lower levels of literacy are seen to have leadership potential, points to an important aspect of the nature of women’s leadership which actively provides opportunities and nurtures younger and more local women to come into leadership roles. However, this also has implications for the internal functioning of the organisation and becomes an axis around which power is exercised. Some of the issues and challenges around the hiring of team members with differing education and

skills, especially with heightened demands of reporting on the leadership, are discussed in Chapter 6.

*Differences in access to educational opportunities:*

**Table 1: External and Internal Reasons for Discontinuing Education by Leadership Levels**

<b>Top three external reasons</b>	<b>First Level (%)</b>	<b>Second Level (%)</b>	<b>All (%)</b>
Community Norms	47.1	42.9	44.7
Fees too High	29.4	42.9	36.8
No School/College Nearby	23.5	14.3	18.4
<b>Top three internal reasons</b>	<b>First Level (%)</b>	<b>Second Level (%)</b>	<b>All (%)</b>
Marriage	64.3	54.2	59.6
Gender Norms within the family	57.1	33.3	46.2
Housework	17.9	50	32.7

We asked respondents who had discontinued their educational journeys to provide reasons for this, which were coded into factors under broad headings of external (outside the family purview) and internal reasons (related to family and community). Among internal reasons, the top three were early marriage, family norms and demands of housework – all three arising from expected gender roles. The differences in reasons between the first and second line however corroborated the distinct class and caste profiles of the first and second-line leaders. For the second-line leaders, the burden of household work was far greater (50% compared to 18%), and was higher than restrictive gender norms (43% compared to 50%). In the context of external reasons as well, the burden of high school fees was a far greater deterrent for the second level (43% compared with 29%).

### **Educational and Occupational Backgrounds of Parents**

For the overall sample, the leaders appear to be from educationally advantaged backgrounds: 83.7% of the fathers were literate, around 40% had completed Class 12 and 24% were graduates and above. These figures compare favourably with the 43.6% male illiteracy rate (Census 1981), which would roughly correspond with the time their parents would have been accessing education.

Not surprisingly, the gender differentials between fathers’ and mothers’ educational level is significant. The illiteracy levels amongst mothers is much higher, at 42.3% (compared to

16% of fathers) but even in this case, the mothers' literacy levels were better than the 70.2% female illiteracy rate according to Census 1981. However, the data also points to an inter-generational shift in educational levels between mothers and daughters (the women leaders) and the qualitative data also shows that mothers who had generally been denied education opportunities themselves played an important role in enabling their daughters to access education.

**TABLE 2: Main Source of Livelihood for Families of the Leaders**

<b>Main Source of Livelihood for the Family of the Leader During Childhood</b>	<b>First Level (%)</b>	<b>Second Level (%)</b>
Regular Employment in Govt. Sector	42.3	32.3
Regular Employment in Shop or Factory	7.0	4.8
Had Own Land - Depended on Farming	14.1	19.4
Self Employed - Petty Business	8.5	17.7
Self Employed - Other Business and other means	15.5	9.7
Wage Labour	7.0	8.1
Other	5.6	8.1
Total	100.0	100.0
Valid Numbers	71	62

Table 2 shows that 37% of fathers were employed either in the government sector, 6% factories worked in factories, 16% farmed on one's own land and 25% were self employed in small businesses; only a small proportion (7.5%) said that the family survived on wage labour. Moreover, the data on government employment does not reflect the level or post. While these categories may suggest regular incomes, the qualitative study presents a more complex picture: livelihoods appear far less stable and many of the respondents spoke about the hardship that came with fathers losing their jobs.

The difference in livelihood sources between first and second-line leaders was fairly stark. While a larger proportion of families of first-line leaders had regular jobs (42.3% in the government sector and 7% in the private sector), for the second level, a significant percentage was in agriculture or self-employed but in petty businesses. This complements other data on caste and education to suggest that women leaders at the second level had a very different profile from those in first-line leadership.

### **Living Situation of Leaders**

Close to two-thirds of the women leaders in the sample (62.4%) were married at the time of the survey. While this figure represents a majority, it is lower than the national norm -

75% of women between 15 and 49 were currently married according to the National Family Health Survey (NFHS) 2005-06.

However, it's significant that 19% of the women interviewed were never married and the rest were either separated or divorced. 24.2% of the second line was never married, suggesting that they are pushing back the age of marriage. The figures of separated and widowed women for both first and second line are roughly the same. Given that the second line has a relatively younger age profile, this could indicate that women are exercising their right to opt out of difficult marriages.

**TABLE 3: Living Status of Women Leaders: State-wise differences**

Proportion of leaders who were:	Rajasthan	Uttar Pradesh	Uttarakhand	All leaders
Never married	15.0	22.2	19.6	19.1
Who were married before *				
14 years	20.0	11.1	0.0	7.9
18 years	35.0	35.6	6.5	25.2
Mean age of first marriage*	18.0	18.2	22.3	19.5

The data shows that one-fourth of the women were married earlier than 18 years, the legal age of marriage. Further, inter-state differences were significant but in keeping with the accepted profiles of these states. In Rajasthan, a state known to have a high incidence of early marriage, 20% of the leaders had been married before the age of 14 years, and 35% before 18 years. The picture in Uttarakhand was different as only 6.5% were married before 18 and the mean age of marriage was more than 22 years. These figures were interesting as they suggest a number of different scenarios – that the women *despite* being married early have been able to exercise a choice and work with women's development organisations; and that as such organisations tend to espouse progressive social agendas, women who been compelled to marry at a very young age or have rebelled against such practices find a place to work in such organisations.

The overall picture emerging from this data suggests that the organisations covered by this study provide a space for women who wish to challenge gender norms related to marriage. We shall see in the qualitative narratives in the following section that marriage has been an arena of struggle and contestation in different ways. Half the leaders (52.3%) surveyed said they were not consulted before their marriages were fixed, the remaining leaders said they were consulted, and 15% married the person of their own choice. Among those who have never married, most said that it was their own decision. There is also a connection between



this data and the fact that many of the organisations work on the issue of early marriage – its prevention or through working with young girls, many of whom are married.

### **Reasons for Women Leaders to Join the Development Sector**

An important element of unpacking women's leadership practices is to understand what motivated these women to join the development sector and work on women's issues. The data suggests that family influence was an important factor. For the sample as a whole, more than one-third of the leaders (33.8%) had relatives who were associated with development work in the past, and for nearly half of the leaders, one or more of their family members were also working in this sector, often in the same organisation. However, the proportion was much higher for first-line women leaders, where 82% were influenced by family members.

A second observation is that the second-line leaders were motivated by the first to join the sector. While the first-line leaders reported that they were motivated by individuals outside of their current organisation (28.2%) and were self motivated (19.7%); for the second line a significant proportion (41.9%) said they were influenced by individuals in their current organisations or by the work of their present organisations (30.7%, as compared with 19% for the first line). Clearly, local women leaders and organisations have played an important role in motivating women to work on issues related to women's rights.

A significant 69% of the first-line leaders were the founders of the organisation, and 50% had worked in similar organisations before starting their own. The desire to start their own organisation stemmed from the fact that they wanted to do something different or to work in different ways. A few respondents said that their motivation to set up their own organisation was a reaction to the discrimination they had experienced in their earlier working environments. Many of these experiences are shared in the qualitative narrative.

In sharp contrast, the current organisation was the first work place of nearly 35% of the second-line leaders and less than one-fourth had worked in the development sector before. This highlights the need for inputs and exposure to different kind of organisational structures and ways of functioning for the emergent leadership. 61.3% of the second-line leaders have gradually moved up in the leadership hierarchy from volunteer or field-level positions.

## **CHAPTER 3: TRACING WOMEN'S JOURNEYS INTO LEADERSHIP**

In this section, we delve into the life histories of the women leaders to deepen our understanding of women's leadership practices. Through the qualitative research tools (outlined in Chapter 1), we sought to understand the ways in which women's lived experiences, family and personal backgrounds have shaped their working lives, the organisations they have formed and lead. We also looked into how the values, spaces and opportunities provided to them by different individuals and organisations have impacted the trajectories of their lives and leadership journeys. The rich data we managed to collect provides a context within which we can better understand the lives of women leaders in small towns.

As mentioned in the section on methodology in Chapter 1, we conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews that followed the phases of the women's lives. We asked the women leaders to talk about their childhoods, their youth and their adult lives. We also asked them to tell us about their working lives - how they came to work with the organisation they now lead and their engagement with the sector more generally. Thirdly, we asked them to reflect on their personal journeys, taking on leadership roles, their views on leadership, the challenges they have faced as well as what they perceive as their achievements. We spoke to at least three persons from each organisation - in total 25 women leaders - attempting to balance the section from across generations and levels of leadership. However, the analysis emerging from this data does not seek to juxtapose experiences of the two levels of leaders, but is more concerned about highlighting emerging themes.

This section is organised around phases that emerged from the life history narratives as being critical in shaping women's perspectives and life courses: childhoods, educational journeys, marriage, working lives, and becoming leaders. For each phase we first present a few select vignettes that reflect the diversity of experiences shared and then analyse these. The extracts are not meant to be representative of all the leaders; they try and comment on the factors influencing leadership practices and what life experiences bring to bear on shaping them as leaders and developing their perspectives.

### **Childhoods**

Several women leaders expressed surprise when we asked them to talk about their childhoods, expecting the interview to focus on their present life, but then shared several powerful experiences from that phase of their lives. With the interview questions acting as triggers, the women leaders extracted clearly marked moments from a reservoir of memories - critical events, everyday experiences or points of crisis - which they decided were important to share. The selected excerpts speak of 'difficult'

childhoods in two ways – in economic terms and around ‘encountering’ gender norms that were restrictive and violative. ‘Struggle’ and ‘survival’ come across as common themes in the rich accounts of the women negotiating complex circumstances, of extreme poverty, violence and insecurity. Events and moments were vividly described that suggested that discrimination and unequal gender relations were experienced and registered quite early on. What was as valuable as the content of the interviews was the process of filtering and reconstruction employed by the leaders, that reveals their self-image of having leadership skills, including the ability to struggle, speak up or be different, early on in life.

### **Arshi’s story**

My father, a bus conductor, lost his job. After that things went downhill for the family. He got addicted to playing the lottery. Every evening we were given Rs 20 for *kharcha* (spending money). There were five of us children. With that Rs 20, we used to manage. Things were bought for that day - Rs 2 worth of ghee, 50 paise worth of masalas, a tiny quantity of everything. My mother used to stitch and teach girls Urdu. This brought in some money. Some days there was nothing to eat. Mother always kept *chana* and *gur* (chickpeas and jaggery). We had some *bakris* (goats). People used to give *sookhi rotis* (dry flatbread) to the goats. We used to take those and store them away. Whenever there was no *aata* (wheat flour), my mother would soak those rotis, knead it into dough and make new rotis. We ate such food for a long time.

My mother used to instruct us - *Bhooke rehna par mangna nahin* (Stay hungry but don’t beg). My mother never attended marriages, she had one saree. We sisters had two sets of clothes, which we got at Eid. Throughout the year we wore those – wash and wear, wear and wash. Then the next year we got another two. We never went anywhere. But I was *tez* (outspoken) from the beginning. When my father used to go and sit at the lottery shop I used to go there and overturn the counter in anger. I used to shout and say, ‘Why are you ruining my father, he does not give us money.’ Everyone sitting there would say your daughter is very *tez*.

The fragility of lower middle-class lives reflected in these accounts is striking, where the loss of a father’s job can have catastrophic implications not just in terms of nutrition and education, but also in creating a self-image of inadequacy. The stress of economic problems added to creating fraught family environments. In her account, Arshi vividly recollected the depths of hunger she felt, the physical work she did to help keep the family afloat, which is echoed by others as well. These are women were not only from working-class families, but had done physical labour themselves. Thus while the quantitative data presented in the previous Chapter shows a high proportion of respondents reporting ‘regular jobs’ or self-employment as the occupational background of their families, which seems to suggest a more well-off profile, the qualitative data shows that this is not necessarily the case. This also points to the importance of getting thick descriptions that enable us to get beneath the numbers.

But possibly more importantly, these accounts reflect the class character from which the leadership is drawn, which is important in problematising some of the current debates within the IWMs, as outlined in Chapter 1. One of these is the supposed professionalisation of women's activism, where it is argued that with increased funding and salaries being paid to staff, the work of women's organisations is routinised and thus robbed of its transformative edge. Roy (2011) argues, based on her work in the metro city of Kolkata, that this dichotomy did not reflect reality: for many staff members of the organisation she studied, working was a necessity. She thus questioned the conflation of voluntary work with commitment or rather that paid activism need not mean a dilution of commitment. Certainly in our study, given the poor and lower-middle-class backgrounds of several staff members and leaders, or that many of the staff members are victims of violence, with no recourse to other support structures, not being paid for the work they did not even come up in discussions as a point of debate. Many women were the sole earners of their families. Many had also used their jobs to alter their class positions. This is not to suggest that hierarchies in salaries do not bring in tensions (see Chapter 5), or the contradictions inherent in the fact that many of the Sangathan women are not paid for their work. However, the lives of these women leaders paints a different picture to what is typically understood to represent leaders of the women's movement. At the end of her interview Arshi reported that she had never spoken about her poverty to her colleagues, but she had not forgotten and would never want to be in that situation again. She has used her salary to invest in her son's education and has aspirations to alter her class position.

### **Urmila's story**

When I was born, my mother faced a lot of problems. I was a girl. So she left me with her parents. Then the next child was a boy, so things got better. My mother struggled to get me back home and ultimately she managed to convince my father.

Our standard of living was very low. My father lost his job with the agriculture department. We (children) made bricks, collected manure, and in the evenings my brother and I used to go and collect sawdust from furniture shops for fuel. My mother used to work as a manual labourer. My father opened a tea stall.

I always wanted to do new things. There was a children's programme on the radio, I really wanted to be on it. I pestered my parents and ultimately my father took me on a cycle. I participated in the programme; from then on I would go there sometimes and participate.

My parents used to fight a lot, he would beat her. We have spent nights outside our house. My mother would say, 'I will kill myself with my children on the railway line.' Then in the morning she would go back home. It's only when we grew up that we stopped this violence.

My mother would beat me a lot. She wanted to get me married early and worried about dowry. She would tell me, 'If I don't get you married I won't go to *swarg* (heaven).' I would say, 'Have you seen *swarg*? But if you get me married I will be in *narak* (hell) right here in this world.' My siblings really

supported me in this struggle. In the meanwhile I started standing up to my father if he beat my mother. It became entrenched in my thinking that dowry and marriage ruin the lives of daughters.

Arshi reflected on how deep-seated feelings of shame and anger made her 'tez' - rebellious and outspoken at a young age. Later on in her interview she again brought up this aspect of her character, when she was struggling to resolve her marital problems. And this, according to her, marks her style of leadership. Similarly, the overt tone of Urmila's narrative is that of a fighter: she resists, contradicts, strategises, stays firm from a fairly young age. Her antipathy to marriage, she said, is based on her childhood experiences and this not only lead her to resist marriage up to the present, but also in her life-long commitment to building awareness against child marriage.

The childhood narratives revealed a strong, rebellious, courageous personality demonstrating sparks of leadership that is already evident in childhood. Many leaders contrasted their 'natures' with that of girls around them who accepted traditional norms. They attributed this in part to their personalities but also recognised the critically catalysing impact of opportunities and support from the 'outside'. In the subsequent narratives we shall see how these incipient acts of resistance, silences, and 'bad experiences' have been processed and acted upon by the leaders, enabled by opportunities and exposure provided in many cases by women's groups, and transformed into new perspectives.

#### **Rina's story**

My father was a *sarkari* (government) schoolteacher. My mother died when I was two. I don't remember much, just that my father would hold us and cry. He remarried a few years later. Initially things were ok. Then there was pressure to separate after my step-sister was born. My brother and I were sent to live with my *dada* (grandfather) and my three *chachas* (father's brothers). My father cried a lot on leaving us. My brother stayed there a few days and then my father took him back home. My chachas were old men or so it seemed to me then. I became completely alone and silent. I made food for my chachas, went to school. I was exploited both mentally and physically. I became pregnant with my chacha. I wrote all this in a letter to my father. My chacha threatened to throw me in the *nehar* (canal). My father came and took me away and said it was his fault, but did nothing to my chachas. I felt like I wanted to die. I had a daughter and three or four years after my father got me married.

I used to blame myself for what happened to me in my childhood. I took a lot of anti-depressants. The day I decided I was not to blame, I became free. I feel convinced about the things I have done in my life. My only regret is that I did not ask my father why he didn't send them to jail. I did not talk about it much because of my daughter. My father took his son back to live with him, how could he forget and leave his 13-year-old daughter with those animals?

During the course of the interviews women made connections between certain critical events and the subsequent opportunities they had had to process these. These, as we will discuss in the next chapters, had a significant bearing on their leadership styles and

organisational commitments. Using the filter of a language of rights available to them in the present, they not only described but analysed and gave meaning – as *bhedbhav* (discrimination) - to these moments. Rina’s retelling of her traumatic experiences of abuse reflect her utter helplessness and deep silence around her feelings of guilt. The circumstances of her childhood offer no possibilities for resistance: she finds this later in life, when she begins working with an NGO and attends a gender training. There she is able to connect with other urban feminists, and despite the differences in context builds long associations that enable her to stop blaming herself and move on to helping other women. Another woman leader, Priti, described her mother’s ill health, which she says she only much later (after beginning to work with a women’s empowerment programme) attributed to repeated childbearing and the disastrous effects it has on women’s health. These women leaders are referring to a phase in history of the IWM where partnerships between urban and rural feminists were actively sought – where women across social contexts connected to not just build solidarity but to develop common and multiple understandings of how patriarchy worked.<sup>23</sup> Critically reflecting on and processing such experiences became the basis of developing feminist training pedagogies. While Rina had had the opportunity to experience such trainings, many have not. Some of the women leaders commented that gender trainings are no longer organised and if they are, it’s as a one-time input, often ‘technical’ in nature.

As part of the quantitative survey we asked respondents if they had attended any gender training at all, and as many as 39% replied that they had never attended any training. Surprisingly, there was not much difference between first and second-line leaders (37% of first-line leaders had never attended a gender training, while the corresponding figure was 41% for second-line leaders). Excavating women’s own experience as a tool for developing analysis and skills requires time and sustained interaction. Their own engagements with their trainers were not just limited to the training room, but to interactions and working together in the field on select occasions. Clearly, despite gender having been mainstreamed with development discourses, the investment in developing perspectives on gender have reduced.

The accounts above also bring to the surface the complicated nature of relationships that girls have with their parents and the implications of normative gender roles within the family not being played out. Underlying all these narratives is a sense that their fathers failed them as providers or protectors – the expected role of male heads of households. The fathers in these narratives were both present and absent: present because their actions and behaviour impacted the family significantly, and absent because they did not fulfil the roles

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<sup>23</sup> An important part of the conceptualisation of the Women’s Development Programme and Mahila Samakhya Programmes discussed in Chapter 1 was built around evolving such training programmes which were initially implemented in partnership with urban feminist organisations.

that male heads of households are meant to. In the narratives fathers came across as shadowy figures – weak and not in control.

On the other hand, mothers were portrayed as the backbone of the family, acknowledged for their resilience and role in enabling the family to survive. They were also portrayed as ‘labouring’ women, which in lower-middle-class homes, women are not typically expected to be. They came across as sympathetic yet strong, working both within and outside the home. They played this role in response to circumstance: to fill a gap and to keep the family intact. However, these were not black and white portrayals of good mother, bad father. In Urmila’s case, recognition of her mother’s hard work was combined with a sense of frustration and anger, of her mother’s repeated return to a violent relationship, and inability to stop the violence. This was further complicated by her mother’s role in insisting on her marriage at an early age and her mother’s violence towards her.

Thus their childhood experiences show that that women’s family members are often complicit in allowing or perpetuating discrimination and therefore upholding patriarchal and gender-discriminatory practices (like dowry and child marriage). Yet there is the lived understanding of how difficult ‘breaking out’ actually is. Surviving in a violent home and experiencing violence herself made Urmila want to fight for other girls. Echoes of these life histories resounded in the passion and commitment of most of these women leaders to take up cases and advocacy around gender-based violence later in their life, in their work, as discussed in Chapter 4.

## **Violence as Turning Point: Contesting Marriage**

For several of the women leaders who had been married, this was a critical turning point in their lives. The life-stories revealed *three* types of contestations around marriage: where violence - both physical and mental - were experienced; where women had to confront humiliation and mental torture; where discrimination was not overt, but insidious and deep-rooted nonetheless. The excerpts below point to the centrality of marriage as an institution where gender inequality is experienced in differing, but powerful ways. This process of questioning marriage, an institution sacred for most women, became possible for many of these women from their own (often difficult) lived experience and subsequently became an important foundation for working on women’s rights issues. The connections between their own experiences of violence and the determination with which these women leaders work on this issue are discussed in detail in Chapter 4.

### **Priti’s story**

The violence began from the first day. He did not want to have anything to do with me. Later I heard he had another relationship. He beat me for no reason. I would be cleaning the rice, he would kick me from behind, and I would fall on my face. At night he would beat me so much my skin would come off.

I kept asking, '*meri galti kya hai?* (What have I done wrong?). My parents have taught me my *arthi* (dead body) must leave from my husband's house.' I tried suicide. But maybe I wasn't meant to die.

For three years I did not say anything to anyone. When I did not have a child, everyone started calling me *banjhan* (barren). He did not want to have a child. I started going home to my parents, but I was always sent back.... *jaise bhi hai, vahan rehna hai* (whatever it is, you have to stay there).

I was pregnant thrice but lost all three because of the violence. After that I felt hatred. If he came near me I would throw things. Everyone said - she is mad. Finally when my son was conceived I somehow managed to escape to my father's house. This time I just refused to go back. I had decided that I would live for my child. My son was born there.

He even beat me at my parent's house. That's when I met *didi* (older sister). They heard about me during a village meeting and came to my house. I was lying there covered in blood; no one had taken me to the doctor. They just picked me up, took me to the hospital and then to their home where I stayed for many days. Slowly I went to the office, then the field. Then I was offered the job of a literacy instructor, and I began teaching in a residential educational programme. Later I became a para-legal worker and now I lead an organisation.

Priti's graphic portrayal revealed her struggles to rehabilitate herself. In her interview she talked about how her understanding on violence evolved and she gradually saw it as an expression of power and unequal gender relations, and not just as mindless acts of psychologically disturbed men. What is also communicated through this narrative is how gender norms are reproduced and maintained through the exercise of violence and the silences around it: violent acts are considered perfectly acceptable by the family; the family is understood as an institution that will uphold gender norms, no matter what. It was this complex understanding borne out of experience that later lead Priti to remark on the difference she feels when working on violence and caste issues, as a Brahmin woman, 'I understand violence *andar se* (from inside); with caste discrimination I have *learnt* to understand it, maybe I still don't understand the *baarikiyan* (nuances).'

Her story is not just one of personal grit or triumph. The other important character in her narrative was the role of the intervener - women's rights activists - who played a role that is in sharp contrast to her family, an institution that not only rejects her, but actively connives to send her back into a violent situation, and is unable to protect her in her own home. Priti has now moulded herself on the lines of the women activists who provided her the opportunities and support and nurtured her leadership. She now plays this role with courage, commitment and conviction with other women. The strategies she employs while working on violence mirror her own journey to combat violence.

Not all the leaders experienced such extreme physical violence but several women described in detail the mental trauma they had experienced over several years and how that impacted their personalities and also what they value as being important in their work. As Premlata remarked, 'My experiences affected my work. I felt like I had been in a



jail for so many years, that is why I give time, I listen ( to other women) and why my work is important for me.'

### **Malti's story**

I got married in 2007 and my daughter was born in 2008. My husband also worked in an NGO. He is Rajput. I am tribal. We had a court marriage. I married into a good family. My mother-in-law lives with us and she helps take care of my daughter. But still, there are challenges.

Once after a meeting I spontaneously decided to go and meet some women. It got late and on the way back we had an accident. I had to go to the hospital. My husband tried calling but my phone had broken. When I got home there was a huge row with my husband: 'My mother does all the work. *Tumara koi deen dharam nahi hai. Koi thikana nahin hai* (nothing is sacred to you; you have no rules). The child also will do as she sees around her. She says you just sleep and go to work.' That was tough. After a long time, I broke down and cried. He came to this area after me. Wedding invitations come in my name saying 'Malti with family.' My husband helps me with my work and yet he gives me a hard time.

I got trapped in the *taam-jhaam* (paraphernalia) of marriage. Those earlier days seem like a *khwab* (dream). I could go anywhere, at anytime. Now I feel concerned about going home everyday. Whatever it is, my daughter is my daughter. I try and give her some time at least. She told me that I am the only mother who doesn't attend birthday parties. Because of Anand (husband, name changed) I have a daughter, a family, so I am grateful somewhere. But it is a *taam jhaam*.

Malti married 'out of choice', which one assumes to be on more equal terms, but she described the kinds of tensions she faces. Her excerpt also illuminates what women leaders have to deal with once they establish themselves as public figures. A wife with greater public recognition than her husband and with greater access to institutions of power overturns traditionally accepted hierarchies. This process of dealing with the tensions of work and family, of trying to maintain a balance, is something that women leaders routinely dealt with both in their own lives, as well as with staff of their organisations. They did so with patience and with the conviction that providing this space, strategising with women workers on how to deal with irate and unreasonable husbands is a central role required of leaders, to build institutions and second-level leadership. In a sense this was a mandate that women leaders assigned themselves - of nurturing and inspiring other women to join and stay with the organisation. This was borne out by the quantitative data (Chapter 2) which shows that the second-level leadership has to a large extent been built by the founders of organisations.

## **Entering the World of Work**

If 'marriage' for many of the women was an important turning point, coming into the world of work was equally critical. In the previous Chapter, quantitative data was provided on what motivated the women to join the development sector. The survey also gathered information on their position as leaders: 42% of the women surveyed were founders of

their present organisation, while 30% had joined in a staff position at the field level and 15% joined as staff members at a supervisory position. Thus interestingly the greatest movement into leadership has been from the field-level position. Further, 43% of the total sample had assumed a leadership position within five years of joining the organisation. The narratives in this section describe the processes through which they get immersed in the work that they now do and grow into leadership.

### **Premlata**

I had no idea what an NGO was. I saw an advertisement and applied. But I was scared off by the NGO – you will have to walk, you will have to work late. For the first three months I used to come home and bathe, and think, how will I eat and sit with them? But they used to feed me with so much love that I used to eat. Success in a particular case gave me recognition; I made strong connections with the field. I feel I can mobilise. I never felt I was doing anything out of the ordinary. People would tell me you are bringing so many women, they trusted me, *'vishwaas tha mujh pe'*.

### **Uma**

I used to see Sarita, Meena and Nisha (second-level women leaders) in town - *'badhiya bag-vag tang ke'* (carrying nice bags) and I wondered how did they get these jobs? One day they came to my village to do a survey and went to the *Pradhan's* (elected head of the Panchayat) house. When they left, I went to the Pradhan and pestered him to ask them for work. Finally he took me to their office where I was interviewed by Sarita and Meena. They called me for a 10-day residential training. I liked the training - *Ghar se alag mahol, bahar ki duniya aisa hota hai pata chala. Sham ko nach gana, dholak'* (the atmosphere was different from my home. The outside world is like this, I thought. In the evenings there was music and dance). When I had to organise the *Baal Manch* (children's forum) across 10 villages, I was also scared but I did not want to sit at home. I got a lot of support from the others.

### **Urmila**

In (my previous organisation) I started working on a project with tribal women..... Working there I learnt a lot, I got clarity on my *soch* (thought process). This influenced me a great deal; Rakesh (name changed), the head of the previous organisation taught me a lot. I was very rough around the edges. The struggles of the Adivasi women helped build me and my perspective. I would stay back in the field and I totally immersed myself in my work. Rakesh supported me at every step. He helped me get a residential quarter in the training centre. I would ride a bike. I learnt how to drive a jeep. The atmosphere in (my previous organisation) was new to me, but I enjoyed it, I blossomed there, got a lot of exposure, learnt about issues, work ethics etc.

From these narratives we would like to highlight two important patterns related to the process of becoming leader: one, is of how a 'job' becomes a commitment; and the second relates to the ideas of learning and support.

In their interviews women discussed how they started their own organisations after having worked elsewhere. We broadly found three types of prior organisational experience – State-run programmes, large NGOs, often with links to progressive movements, and

identity-(caste) based organisations. In most instances prior working experience has been crucial in building perspective and in providing the support and guidance to start out on their own. Premlata and Urmila founded organisations with the support of other established non-governmental organisations (NGOs). They gained experience in organising and understanding the needs of rural women while working in these organisations (some of whom had links with other movements), and this experience subsequently provided them the resources to imagine new possibilities for themselves.

### **From Job to Life-long Commitment**

Both Premlata and Uma's narratives show how deeply sceptical and unfamiliar with NGO cultures they were at first. What was interesting in the narratives was the way in which they described getting 'hooked' to the work. Premlata was from a different social background to the women she had to work with and openly shared her initial prejudices. An important part of her process was the immersion and bonds she established with the field and with grassroots women. Making this connection transformed the work from being just another job to becoming a life mission. She was employed not because of having qualifications, but just a willingness to try (she said yes despite all the difficulties presented to her). Women's organisations have been critiqued for the job culture that has crept into their mode of working, representing a shift from commitment to a cause to working at a job like any other. In our study we saw several instances, including the both first and second-line leaders, where the journey moves in the opposite direction: a job becomes a life-long commitment to the cause of working with rural women. Uma's narrative shows the way in which younger second-line leaders start playing a very critical role of being role models and in identifying other young women to join. The 'hook' for Uma is the very different environment that trainings and women's organisations provide. For these young women leaders, the potential of developing a political understanding of women's development and their rights takes place during the course of working a 'job'.

The other debate highlighted in Chapter 1 also related to the broad theme of depoliticisation of the IWM, triggered by women's organisations becoming increasingly specialised and the creation of a cadre of 'gender experts'. Our findings in this study do not resonate with any of those trends: the women leaders who were part of the study, despite years of work in the field, do not identify themselves as experts; hiring and induction processes are often informal, often even rejecting formal qualifications. Premlata, for instance, identifies herself as an implementer and her leadership skills are now embedded in the community, one that she has nurtured over several years. This identity of being close to the field is what women leaders draw on as their strength, and it is also how funding agencies, the State machinery and even the IWM constructs them (discussed further in Chapter 4).

The third commonality from the narratives in terms of their professional journeys, is the process of learning described. Rather than any formal training what unfolds learning is based on mentorship. Seniors teach juniors and knowledge and values are thus transmitted. The mentorship is not restricted to only formal knowledge transfer but extends to providing all kinds of emotional and personal support. Urmila described the wide-ranging ways in which she was assisted. This internal and informal mode of learning was both a preferred mode, yet simultaneously pointed to the lack of formal opportunities for capacity building. We have reported earlier about the lack of gender training opportunities. The quantitative data shows a similar lack of opportunity for any kind of leadership development: 44% of both first and second-line leaders reported not having had any kind of formal inputs in leadership development. The second learning space is the field and women themselves. Both Premlata and Urmila described how learning from the women they worked with was central to their process of professional development.

**BOX 1: Building leadership – Seema’s Story**

Seema’s account reveals is the role women leaders play in providing opportunities, nurturing and building committed local leaders. Once again, this is not built on very organised plans for capacity building but just by providing the space, opportunity and creating a sense of self that enables women to believe that they can learn and grow, personally and professionally.

**Seema’s story**

Our father used to have a *thela* (handcart, implying he was a hawker). None of us [children] studied. I really wanted to study, and dreamt of what I would do if I was educated. I always knew it was a pipe dream.

I started coming to Organisation E for the legal support they were providing me. I liked the atmosphere there. I loved the songs and the *naaras* (slogans). Apa was a big support. She said I should stay at the office. I worked as an office helper - gave people water and tea, kept the office clean. Over time I joined tuition classes and began to go to the *thana* (police station) with them (NGO workers) when needed. In those days I used to wear the burqa. I would join in the *padyatras* (campaigns on foot) in my burqa.

I was always interested in violence cases. I would listen to the women who came to the office and begin crying when I heard what they were going through. I would tell them about my story and how the organisation had helped me. Even though I could barely read and write Apa made me a *karyakarta* (field worker) in 2009. They said they had confidence in me, they told me I could maintain registers. This in turn gave me the confidence to read and write. I thought '*marna insan ko ek bar hai kyouin na kuch karke marun.*'

In 2009 I gave my Class 8 exams. I attended computer courses in Lucknow and also attended a course specially held for Muslim girls which they had organised.

## **Conclusion**

We see in the personal journeys of the leaders a range of factors that come into play in taking on leadership roles. Two elements stand out in these narratives, one is that experience, whether in one's own life or of the field work done, has been critical in building the leaders grasp of the issues and politics of gender. This forms the framework from which they act and build their own practices of mentoring and bringing women into leadership. The other key element is that external interventions, support or even the offer of jobs and exposure are important points in the journey to leadership. These provide leaders the opportunity to grow, reflect and work upon their own ideas, assumptions and experiences and have resulted in developing their own ethics and styles of leadership. This demonstrates how key the connections between individuals' personal and work context are to the idea of leadership. Leadership cannot be taught, it needs to be built.

## CHAPTER 4: WOMEN LEADERS IN THE PUBLIC REALM

Over the next two chapters, we unpack the leadership practices of this group of women leaders – once seen as implementers of development projects, and now leaders in their own right. Our analysis looks at two dimensions in which they practice leadership: the public and private. The first (public domain) involves understanding the vision, perspectives and strategies informing the work they and their organisations undertake; and the second (private domain) relates to the leadership practices involved in establishing structures, organisational culture, and the management of resources (both human and financial). The internal world of organisations is usually rendered invisible in most accounts documenting organisational histories and surfaces when organisational conflict and crisis becomes public. An underlying theme in both chapters is to unravel how women leaders strategise and exercise power when making decisions, while identifying issues, taking risks or thinking about how to take their organisations forward. The chapters will show how power is asserted and negotiated within a complex and messy web of social relations that leaders encounter both when engaging the public (women, the community, the State, for example) and the private (within their organisations).

In this chapter, we look closely at how women leaders function in the public domain, often referred to as the ‘field’. In exploring the field the research revealed the following areas that have been critical sites where women have worked to establish their leadership: with rural women, their core constituency; the local community at large; and the State. We therefore describe and analyse some common strategies, challenges and contestations that women leaders have experienced. We try and understand their core concerns and complexities they face while trying to embed their vision into their work.

### **BOX 1: EVOLUTION OF WORK ACROSS ORGANISATIONS: SOME PATTERNS**

While there was tremendous diversity within the eight organisations studied, some broad patterns emerged across the organisations. All leaders, irrespective of their years of work, represented their institutional history in three phases, though the number of years they assigned to each phase varied. We had also asked leaders to name each phase, such that they felt best embodied the leadership’s role.

In Phase 1 (most commonly a three-year period) the leadership was typically characterised for its informality, and for being driven. As organisations were small and taking shape, the leadership felt unfettered, exploring and taking decisions about what issues to take up or area where they should work. The challenges too were local, and experienced primarily in their efforts to gain trust and credibility with the women. Phrases like *vichran* (to wander) and *jazba* (passion) captured the spirit of the leadership in this phase.

The second phase (which varied from 3-10 years) was a phase of expansion and consolidation of the leadership’s mandate. The organisation expanded its areas of operation, the range of issues it worked on. Teams grew, assets were built and the leadership became busy with mentoring new staff and fashioning the nuts and bolts of their organisation. The interface between meeting funders’ mandates, which required new

information and areas of expertise, and leader's own vision created pushes and pulls for the leadership. A phrase used to typify this phase was *mazbooti* (could imply strength, stability, endurance)

The third phase (average time span of three years) saw leaders grappling with questions of sustainability and survival. Leaders were also concerned with consolidating, strategising and leveraging their work beyond the local. By now a second-line of leadership nurtured by the founders had emerged. The first-line leadership was preoccupied with raising resources and delegating responsibility to an emergent leadership. Having moved into advocacy-related work, balancing the demands of the macro-environment with local women's needs pushed leaders to innovate and re-imagine their strategies and work. This phase was represented as *anishchita* (uncertainty) by several leaders.

## Working with Rural Women

### Gaining Trust and Creating a Persona

For all the leaders, establishing and nurturing a committed constituency amongst rural women was central – both to their initial entry into the area and their on-going work. The terms *pakad* (gaining command), *sampark* (having connections) and *pehchaan* (building an identity) used frequently during the course of the research can be assumed as being the three pillars on which their engagement with rural women rested. These terms conveyed the nature of this engagement: as direct and intimate. Leaders built trust not just with individual women but their extended kinship and family networks, by developing an in-depth understanding of their beliefs and cultural practices, and participating in moments of *sukh* and *dukh* (happiness and sorrow) in women's lives. Leaders claimed the right to represent and speak for rural women, on the basis of such relationships.

For many leaders like Hema, building these connections symbolised their rites of passage.

One day when I was leaving Balighat (a remote village) after meeting (to strategise about preventing illegal mining) with a group of women, one of the woman put something in my hand and said, 'Take this. This is from our *kosh* (savings fund)'. It was Rs 25 rupees which they were giving me for my travel expenses. I can't tell you how it made me feel. I was so touched. These women were all Dalit. If I have to put a marker I would say my work actually started from here, especially with women. All my ideologies came to life here.

For Hema, and many of the women leaders we spoke to, it was the deep and engaged nature of their *sampark* built literally one woman at a time, which was a source of strength for their leadership. Hema saw this as a marker because it clarified her understanding of feminism that connected women across contexts and class locations to work towards common goals of gender and social justice. Many leaders spoke of long-lasting relationships with women in the community, which they continue to draw on even though their contact with 'the field' may have grown more distant over time

Building relationships with women was not without challenges: it took time and hard work. 'There was a lot of *shaq* (suspicion); Rumours about me being married to a Hindu man spread in the area. It was rumoured that my office was a *kotha* (brothel), as I always had a

woman with me', recounted Mumtaz. Many of the women leaders we interviewed were not from the area where they had chosen to work. A majority came from different districts or towns, or were returning to the area after a while. For a woman, being *bahari* (from outside), meant that her connections to that area were not related to the family (either parental or marital), she had no male protection and was there (wandering around villages) of her own choice. This fundamentally challenged established gender norms - around women's mobility for instance - and led to questions being raised about sexuality, as in Mumtaz's case. As did Anil's impression of the leader of Organisation H.

When she came to the village we used to feel scared of her.... We thought she was a big leader.... She could make friends fast, she had tact, knew what to say to whom, she could attract people. She used to come alone, with a bag hung on her shoulder, with short hair. We used to stare at her.

Everything the women leaders did and represented challenged the dominant - rural and patriarchal - images of 'good women', generating feelings of both fear and awe. What also complicated the women leaders situation was their class background: these women were neither elite (inaccessible) nor alien (unfamiliar); their language and background made them closer to the rural communities with which they worked than city dwellers (professional government social workers for example). They did not have the privileges that an elite class position brings, nor could they rely on 'powerful' contacts to bail them out of difficult situations. Still, they were not recognised as being 'one of us' by the community and occupied an insider-outsider location.

While initially being different from other local women was a challenge, leaders also worked towards constructing a distinct identity, as it also established the organisations work as being different and unique. And the intensity of their relationships with women set them apart from other (male-headed) NGOs and (political) leaders and established their work as being more grounded than that of other NGOs and government initiatives.

### **Building Strength through Structures**

Leaders across the spectrum consolidated these field-level connections by establishing *sangathans* (grassroot-level structures or institutions) in their areas of work early on in their organisation's history. Over time, as the organisations expanded and extended the range of issues they worked on, sangathans too evolved in complexity. This strategy (as outlined in Chapter 1) has been prevalent in development discourses since the mid-Nineties, and for this group of women leaders as well, this was a critical aspect of their work. They saw it as critical to embedding their vision and approach within the community, sustaining processes of change, facilitating negotiations both within their community and vis-à-vis the State, establishing their authority and maintaining a ear-to-the-ground, even as their scale of operation expanded.



As their organisations started taking on projects and collaborating with the State, or undertaking broader advocacy work these grassroots groups continued to act as pressure groups. Having a substantial grassroots presence was also important in building the credibility of their work with other stakeholders like the government and funding agencies. As Malti illustrated, 'A funder came to us. They asked us for some case studies and some facts and figures. We took them around to see our field. They shared it with their executive body and we got the project. We never had to write a proposal.' Neither does this group of leaders have the class privilege of urban, educated women, nor does it draw on kinship and identity-based local power structures, which local male leaders readily draw upon. It is the grassroots-level organisation that empowers and lends credibility to the leader in the local context.

However, this was not a one-way process of creating power for the leader: women from the community too draw power from their partnerships with the leaders. As these grassroots institutions came into their own, women participating in them too made claims, pressurised and pushed the leadership to take on challenging issues. The example shared by Hema, from the early years of Organisation A's history illustrates how sangathan leaders also shape the organisation's agenda.

The Sangathan women had been saying that they wanted two liquor shops in the town shut at any cost. There was a lot of debate within the organisation about whether we should get involved. Opinions were divided, many of us felt it was an impossible task. Also it would turn all the men against us, making our work in the community even tougher. On the other hand it had become a public nuisance and incidence of domestic violence had escalated. I think that and the women's insistence swung the balance in favour of deciding that we would start an *andolan* (movement).

We locked both the shops after sending a letter to the authorities and the shop owners, giving them 15 days notice to take action. We camped outside the shops - five women from each village would take shifts every day. We would sleep there at night. The planning used to take place in the sangathan, all the women leaders used to be present. The shop owners faked signatures and gave a press release that the women have agreed to let the shops open. When we got to know we countered it with our own press release. This put us in direct confrontation with the men but others like the youth said it was a good thing. The entire *andolan* lasted 45 days.

The push for closing the liquor shops and even in sustaining the campaign over a long period came from the women's sangathan. The leadership played a critical role in taking the fight to arenas where the women might not have had the skills or resources to battle, as in the case of the media and political parties. Working on the case together sent out important messages: the NGO leadership proved that they had the stomach to raise contentious issues (and not just implement projects); the sangathan women also established that their interests had to be addressed. Many organisations narrated in detail such cases that pointed to the complex relationship between the NGO and the grassroots structures that they established. In the example above the interaction is a positive one;

often the negotiation can be contentious, but in all cases the importance of this relationship was constantly underlined.

### **Establishing Gender Equality as Central**

One of the primary tasks for any leader (and those in our study were no different) is to envision, provide direction and a perspective for the work the organisation does. For the leaders in our study, very simply, their agenda for change was to bring about gender equality, which was repeatedly articulated as fighting for *Haq, Adhikar aur Mauka* (rights, entitlements and opportunities) for women. To get beyond the rhetoric, our research methodology involved asking leaders to explain their ideas through examples, some of these we share in the next section, to discuss how concepts were incorporated into their leadership practices.

Our research showed that while leaders worked broadly with three approaches to achieving gender equality - through a broad-based development platform; community-specific interventions; and by working at the intersection of gender and other forms of inequality. What we also found was that a messy reality often unfolded, as concepts and practices came into conversation within a field of complex social relations.

#### *Gender Equality through Development for All Women*

The most common approach was one where women leaders positioned themselves as catalysts for facilitating women's development. Typically, their organisations' work involved enabling women, especially from poorer sections of society to access entitlements, and ensuring that the schemes and programmes initiated by the State reach its true beneficiaries.

##### **Swati**

We started our work in the remotest villages in the district. No government service was available there. The population in two panchayats where we worked were mostly Dalit. In the rest of the panchayats it was a mix of Brahmins, Kshatriyas and some Dalits. There were a lot of discriminatory caste practices that existed there. The traditional occupations were dairy and vegetable farming. All the manual work is done by the women and all the marketing is done by the men. Women had no control over any income. So we started working with all women.

In the above example, equalising gender relations between men and women is the overarching framework. The approach is to include all women within a particular area within the organisation's ambit. In this articulation we see how caste relations are both recognised and sidelined in determining the leaders approach. Finally the realities of caste discrimination are subsumed within the perspective of addressing the inequality of gender relations, in this case in agricultural practices, across women of different communities.

Whether these unequal gender relationships in farming played out differently for Dalit women was not factored into their analysis or intervention.

Leaders like Urmila, who also work with the poorest women, still choose to work with the category of gender, with a recognition of inter-community differences. Her organisation's work became identified with working with socially marginalised communities, as the poor largely comprised these castes. However, the desire of the leadership was to work across communities, as working with specific communities was seen as being divisive. As Urmila says:

**Urmila**

We started our work with all communities but later we were associated more with SC/ ST and Muslims. This was because there were (discriminatory) caste practices prevalent in the village. So (Dalits) felt they had a problem and we were speaking for them. Even the upper-caste women observed purdah so their situation is as oppressed as lower-caste women in term of mobility and freedom. Also working in upper-caste villages was tougher, they would threaten us. But our awareness work targets everyone, whichever caste they may be from. Our identity is linked to gender issues.

In her case, while she recognises that 'women' are not a homogenous category, she strives to address gender inequality across all communities. Her motivation to do so emerges partly from her approach of privileging gender over other axes of disadvantage, but she is also cognisant of the practical realities of negotiating power relations of the upper castes, who she perceives as being threatening. Thus an underlying tension throughout these accounts is whether gender should be understood and operationalised as a universal (cross-cutting is a favoured term), unifying category or community-specific experiences of gender inequality should be addressed. For most of the leaders working with this approach, gender is finally taken as the main lens of analysis.

*Community-specific Interventions*

In the second approach the leadership identified and worked with specific disadvantaged communities, which in our research were primarily Dalits, Adivasis and Muslims. Women's secondary status within community identities was a key reason for mobilising and organising them. For the women leaders working with this perspective, raising questions of women's equality within these communities and to advocate for their interests vis-à-vis the State were equally critical. Consequently, we see the leadership proactively taking up interventions in community-based bodies like caste-based panchayats and religious forums and creating mechanisms for women to engage with these on a regular basis. With this approach, leaders work with communities separately but then also try and bring them together.

Premlata works with both upper-caste (Rajput) women and with tribal women. These groups occupy vastly different positions in rural caste/community hierarchies, with Rajput women occupying a far more powerful position. In Premlata's analysis, Rajput women, despite their upper-caste status were 'oppressed' in terms of strict rules regarding mobility and purdah; tribal women have high mobility as they work primarily as daily-wage labourers, yet they are unable to access government schemes - therefore her organisation worked with both communities. However, her goal is to bring both groups together under one umbrella. 'Earlier when we used to have meetings the Adivasi women were hesitant to sit with the Rajput women. The Rajput women would say, "How can we sit with them?" I said we talk of the Mahila Manch, how can we be a group if basic equality is not there?'

The premise on which women's collectives are built, as discussed previously, is strength in numbers to consolidate their collective bargaining position. Yet, while undertaking this endeavour, their approach was to work with communities in different silos and bring them together. Thus when asked how they looked at caste as an issue within the organisation, Premlata responded, 'When people ask us which *samaj* (caste) you are from, we say *naari* (women's) samaj. We view caste only within the category of male or female.' Thus, the leadership promotes the idea that relations between men and women are at the heart of the equality issue, while simultaneously choosing to engage with women from specific communities. The leadership chooses to articulate its position strategically: if they take on the caste system, the space to intervene in issues specific to women may be foreclosed. The discourse on women's rights provides them a toe-hold to enter community-based forums and demand justice.

### *At the Intersection of Gender and other Identities*

Some leaders worked at the intersection of gender and other identities, notably caste and religion. In these NGOs, in addition to development and women's issues, caste and religious discrimination was also taken up, especially in terms of how this affects women's lives. The analytical framework used here was to understand the interplay of gender, caste and religion within and across communities in a dynamic way.

#### **Mumtaz**

The caste composition of the area has Gujjar, Jats and Muslims. Jats are members of Jati and Khap Panchayats, and in government jobs, in the police, the army and in politics. Pradhans at the village level are from this community, as are teachers, Shiksha Mitras, Anganwadi workers.<sup>24</sup> They have land. Children and women have the worst deal in this community. There are also Muslim Tyagis, Muslim Brahmins, Muslim Jats. There are members of the Jhojha Muslim community from Turkey.

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<sup>24</sup> Gujjar and Jats are richer agricultural castes belonging to the backward class category. Khap panchayats are powerful traditional caste based institutions. Shiksha Mitras are para (contract) teachers; and Anganwadi is the commonly used name for female workers of the Government run Integrated Child Development Scheme (ICDS)

They have their own system and don't believe in the law or in the constitution. They have no space at all for women.

Mumtaz's analysis reflects a complex understanding of caste and community dynamics, by connecting economic relations with those of gender and caste. She links these with access to State benefits. Further, her analysis also opens up the category Muslim to show how it is not a homogenous group. She further argues that despite these groups having vastly different histories and positions in the social hierarchy, the space for women in these groups is negligible.

Thus the approaches reflect very diverse ways in which gender equality is analysed and operationalised. We also see very different vocabularies at play. While these three approaches reflect the broad contours of action and visioning, they do not exist in a pure state. Leadership practices draw on different approaches to handle particular issues or cases. For example, a group working specifically with tribal women also actively took up cases of violence against women from all castes and religious communities. The important point here is that leaders locate gender equality at the heart of their work. This not only brings a certain politics to their work but also provides them a powerful way to stake claim to lead the women they do and also to the communities that the women belong to.

### **The Dilemmas of Gender and Identity**

The leader's own identity often brought in further complexities to organisational and leadership development processes. Women leaders, particularly the Muslim women in our study, talked about the fact they found it difficult to 'rise above' their community identity, even if they wanted to assume the more inclusive category of 'woman'. It was not just their rhetoric or the positions they took on issues that mattered: the clothes they wore, their persona, the cultural markers they adopted were critical to how and whether their leadership would be accepted or challenged. Where leaders attempted to work across communities, for example in building both Dalit and Muslim women's forums, identity politics came to the fore more sharply.

Mumtaz, a Muslim woman leader shared her strategies of establishing her secular credentials and being able to represent issues of both Dalit and Muslim women:

I chose a Hindu name for my organisation. My physical appearance was apparently already that of a Hindu woman [not wearing burqa or hijab, at times wearing a bindi on her forehead]. Muslim women were naturally not accepting of me. Why did I choose to not work only with Muslim women? I did not want to be branded as non-secular, as someone who is only working for her own community. Even when I was working with both communities there was an accusation that I belonged to Lashkar-e-Toiba and an inquiry was conducted against me.

In the context in which Mumtaz worked, religious identities created distinct social and political boundaries, thus how she positioned herself on a daily basis became an issue of strategic decision-making. What 'Muslim' cultural symbols could Mumtaz adopt or reject to appear not 'too Muslim' to the Dalit women and yet not alienate Muslim women? Referring to this dilemma, Mumtaz pointed out, 'I am not viewed merely as an activist representing women. As an activist speaking on behalf of Dalit and Muslim women [on issues of honour killings or on marriage by choice] my own religious identity comes to the fore. Fatwas are issued against me.' For these leaders, constructing a different identity - as a women's rights advocate or a development worker - was not just an issue of semantics but a site where gender politics were played out at an everyday level. Thus the interplay between how leaders personally constructed their identity and how their identities were constructed by external forces were an important concern for women leaders, especially those from socially disadvantaged communities.

#### **BOX 2: THE POLITICS OF DECISION MAKING: THE STORY OF ORGANISATION G**

A dead animal was thrown at the doorstep of a Dalit family. The leadership of Organisation G rushed to the spot. The Dalit women from the village had already surrounded the local police post. The Station Officer (a high-ranking local police officer) rushed to the venue, and tried to pressure the Dalit community to remove the carcass. The leaders, along with the women, insisted that those who had thrown the carcass must pick it up. After considerable pressure and fear of reprisal from the upper castes, the situation was defused, with the police and the Brahmins removing the dead cattle together. Here, the nascent leadership had no prior experience of organising or legal expertise. It was the momentum generated by the women's anger that carried them forward and they admitted that - '*Hum nauk ki dhar par khade the*' (we were standing on the knife's edge).

In the case above the decision was apparently taken instinctively, but with the clarity that the organisations' leaders were arguing from the standpoint of Dalit women - who did not have institutional power or the status to articulate their position but were there in solidarity. If the leader herself belonged to the community being challenged, the task was often more difficult, as in this case, where she says her position was double-edged: being an 'insider' to the community gave them some power, but it also made them vulnerable to attack. For the women leaders taking up cases like these were also strategically important in establishing her perspective: whose interests she was willing to represent? Further, they established personal leadership qualities: she was brave, she could argue, she had information and possibly had access to the world outside. While all leaders would strategise while taking decisions, in these cases her vulnerability stemmed from not having access to traditional sources of power (institutional and social) which compelled her to leverage both personal and professional resources, while building on women's support base.

## **Violence as the Site for Transforming Gender Relations**

While in the previous sections we have discussed the diversity with which leaders approach gender equality, violence against women (VAW) was a common issue that almost

all the leaders worked on, regardless of whether they had the resources for it or not, irrespective of their social location. In the quantitative survey, when asked to list and identify the three most important areas of work, close to 80 per cent of the 71 organisations studied identified their work on empowering women and preventing violence against women as their priority area of work. The table below provides state-wise data on three focus areas the organisations considered to be their priority.

**TABLE 1: Focus Areas of Work of Organisations**

State	Issues	Proportion
Rajasthan	Struggle against violence/women empowerment	68.2
	Health	50.0
	Education/literacy/child rights	45.5
	Micro finance/SHG	36.4
Uttar Pradesh	Struggle against violence/women empowerment	80.8
	Education/literacy/child rights	65.4
	Skills/employment/land issues	38.5
	Legal support/awareness	34.6
Uttarakhand	Struggle against violence/women empowerment	87.0
	Education/literacy/child rights	65.2
	Skills/employment/land issues	39.1
	Environment/conservation/forests	30.4
All states	Struggle against violence/women empowerment	78.6
	Education/literacy/child rights	58.6
	Skills/employment/land issues	35.7

The qualitative data provides insights into three sets of influencing factors for prioritising this work. One was the leaders' first-hand experience of facing violence and their own struggles, often dramatic and long drawn out, which we have discussed at length in Chapter 3. However, we did not want to essentialise the work on VAW by suggesting that the

motivation for working on the issue emerges entirely from personal experience or because of their identities as women. The importance of women's experiences of violence either first hand or through close engagement with the field is important because it lies at the heart of the leaders' vision to transform gender relations towards gender equality. And thirdly, choosing to work on VAW has been an important and strategic way in which women have established their leadership.

Violence is an important means through which men and families assert power and control over women. Many of the leaders had developed a critical perspective on violence, which entailed looking at the domestic sphere as an important space where gender discrimination occurs and gender norms are reinforced. This was what also made them unique, as they held that most development organisations, even those that had women's empowerment and rights as their stated goals, did not wish to disturb the family structure and their work on women's empowerment focussed on *bahari duniya* (external world). Thus, the priorities of the leaders in our study were determined by the passionate interplay of personal and political imperatives. It is therefore not experience alone, but when it is worked upon, reflected and analysed that it becomes an important part of the priorities and organising strategy of women.

Through the accounts of Mumtaz, Priti and Urmila (Chapter 3) we also realised how these leaders develop a close understanding of how gender relations work. Journeys to move out from a violent situation (which as we have shown often continued over a long period of time), led women to recognise that violence was not limited to men's control over women, but was also tied to women's own acceptance of this as part of their life condition and to systemic and structural issues. Not just in the typical way of 'women are women's worst enemies' but in terms of the interlocking power dynamics between individuals, families and institutions. As Urmila says:

My mother faced a lot of domestic violence; many times she contemplated ending her life with her children. She was standing on a thin line. I want to create a place where a woman can take shelter, maybe even for a few days or however long she requires with no regulations, so she can revive her strength, get support to deal with her situation.

This understanding of VAW as an expression of power was a framework they used to analyse cases they took on, and in their approach: these took on board women's own fears and ambivalence to pursue their cases. This nuanced understanding of the conditions of women's lives also impacted the way leaders shaped organisational policies (not always written): their hiring policy for instance, applying the principal that personal experience is a powerful educator, thus women who have faced violence and have fought back are well placed to pursue cases and support other women. Seema's narrative (in Chapter 3) discusses this in considerable detail. Thus understanding the 'personal', as a space where



gender discrimination is perpetuated, rather than merely seeing these as personal experiences, had an important role in shaping organisational mandates and vision.

This clarity of purpose, that addressing violence against women would be a priority area for them, in turn informed their strategy of entering the field. This was not always explicitly stated as leaders recognised that it was not easy to talk about violence that women face either within the home or outside. Thus as described earlier in this chapter, they started out collectivising women around accessing entitlements and development issues. Gradually, as women organised, built solidarity networks, cases of violence started coming up in the discussions. While collectivising women is a common enough mobilisation strategy, violence against women is not always picked up as an issue to be actively addressed and engaged with. This difference is what leaders repeatedly pointed to.

### **Working with Community and State**

Undertaking work on VAW compels women leaders to both confront and engage with community and State institutions. The manner in which the leadership in all the organisations studied had positioned itself vis-à-vis the community revealed the complex terrain within which women leaders work. Their positions on cases, particularly cases of violence against women, brought most of the leaders into direct conflict with the powerful in the community. Leaders acknowledged the need to 'buy' peace with some sections in the community if they were to continue work with women. Subsequently, they built a 'constructive' mode of engagement. One way in which they did this was to, by the second phase of their history, take on diverse projects (see Box 1 on page 70). The projects enabled leaders to 'deliver' development programmes (agriculture, education, microcredit, implementation of various government schemes, running of family counselling centres, for example), which were beneficial in the eyes of the community and also established the leader and organisation's ability to raise financial resources.

Thus combining 'delivery'-oriented and 'rights-based' work – which often enabled women to engage with and gain the confidence of the wider community, notably men – was a strategic consideration by the leadership. As Swati explained, 'This work also provided a buffer between us and the men in the community. The tangible benefits accruing through developmental interventions absorbed the resentment of the men in the community.' Some leaders mentioned that they were aware that taking on 'delivery' work, was often critiqued for being 'apolitical' (not rights based), but they were unashamed in declaring that it was inevitable, if not desirable, located where they were and if they wanted to continue doing what is considered development work. Arriving in the village to work on development projects often led to contradictions in terms of what set the organisations apart from other NGOs and the State: having to routinely confront issues of corruption, for example. Often, getting embroiled in such projects took up a great deal of time and energy (keeping

accounts, dealing with government bureaucracy, getting funds released on time, to name a few). But as Hema said, 'We use these projects as tools to reach people. I keep reiterating this to the team: the people are more important than the project.' The challenge lies precisely in doing this, as we shall see in the next chapter.

For leaders working in the rural heartland, the State was negotiated with on a daily basis and in myriad ways – be it in health and education institutions, law enforcement agencies or the local administration. They engaged with and against both the power of the 'developmental' State and the 'coercive' State (when working on issues of VAW, discrimination, corruption etc). Speaking in different tongues was an integral part of working with the State at the block and district level, and those leaders who are able to manoeuvre across this landscape are viewed as credible and 'respected' leaders. A reflection of having gained that level of recognition is inclusion in district-level committees (sexual harassment committees, committees to monitor education, health, for instance). Women leaders viewed these as critical forums to intervene in and bring their own experience, knowledge and networks to bear upon the workings of these committees.

### **Engaging the Caste Panchayats: A Carrot and Stick policy**

Two important strategies that women leaders employed in engaging with the community, particularly in the context of dealing with VAW were: to engage with formal community institutions like caste panchayats; to establish alternative women-led community institutions like *Nari Adalats* (Women's Courts).<sup>25</sup> In this section we briefly discuss the motivations and challenges that leadership faced while working with caste panchayats.

Engagement with *jati panchayats* (caste panchayats) could not be bypassed, especially for groups in Rajasthan as caste panchayats still dominate the options available to women to access justice. Taking on such institutions often results in retaliation, dominated as they are by powerful men, 'When we went to the caste panchayat for the first time, they were so angry with us, they could have killed us. Women will now dance on our heads, make us wear *ghaghras* (traditional skirts), was what the caste leaders said', Premlata admitted. Mumtaz underlined the power that such forums still held and the degree of exclusion that women experience, regardless of the fact of whether these were Hindu caste panchayats or those in the Muslim community.

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25 Such efforts date back to the Eighties, as part of the WDP in Rajasthan and also formed part of MS's work in the Nineties (See Ramachandran and Jandhyala 2012). Community women are trained as para-legals and they convene to hear cases of women who approach them. Often these women do not want to go to court and are looking for mediation. Nari Adalat women are trained to interpret the law from a gender or feminist perspective.

A woman leader does not get the *manch* (platform) that a male leader does. When I attended the X Khap panchayat (community council) there were many *dadi-wale netas* and *Jat netas* (leaders with beards and those belonging to the Jat community). I went, but I was very scared as I was the only woman. Everyone had eyes only for me. Then a woman reporter from *Outlook* magazine came. We supported one another. I did not go up on stage to speak, I spoke sitting in the audience. I got responses like, 'Where do you think you have come from? Take your ideas and opinions home and remember women are best when they are behind the veil.'

A carrot and stick approach would best describe how the organisations studied engage with jati panchayats. The stick they use is the threat of the legal system, as Radha shows in the case below.

Yashoda refused to go back to her husband's house. The caste panchayat threatened, 'We will get her stripped naked and hang her. We will cut her nose and ears off if she refuses.' I told them I am not moving from here and this girl is not going anywhere. If anyone dares to touch her, he will go to jail. Then there was the case of a 105-year-old woman, she was being beaten by her sons and their wives. We went to the police.

To get a toe-hold into the institution, the carrot is employed: joining their monthly meetings in temples, organising seminars to orient them on the problems of early marriage, promoting education, encouraging them to take oaths that they will not arrange '*kundalis*' (birth charts) of under-age children and getting them to sign such letters voluntarily. Once they gain an entry point into the institution, leaders push to reform how caste panchayats operate on customs and practices related to women and girls, especially to do with early marriages, separation and maintenance issues.<sup>26</sup>

A way in which caste panchayats (or other such community forums) are contested is through 'formalising' alternative frameworks of gender justice like *naari adalats* (women's courts). Through these the leadership embedded ideas of feminist ideas of gender justice within community discourses, through trained para-legal workers. Such initiatives were critical in establishing that gender equality is not an alien concept espoused by educated outsiders.

### *The Challenges of Working with Caste-based Institutions*

In with caste panchayats or on cases of VAW, the challenge is not only external but how leaders and members of organisations themselves understand gender justice issues. These are not always clear or challenging of norms. For instance, tensions emerged while discussing the positions that the leaders and staff of Organisation F took when addressing

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<sup>26</sup> One of the significant reasons for high incidence of child marriage is poverty. See Nirantar 2014 for a detailed exploration of the causes and context of the practice in India.

cases around the practice of *Naata*.<sup>27</sup> The position of Organisation F's head on *naata*, was that: 'It is not bad in spirit, if a girl is unhappy or widowed, she can choose her own partner. But it is being misused and has become a trade.' However, others in the Organisation F were vehemently against it as women who went in *naata* were denied rights or claims over resources. Most of the cases that came to the organisations were of 'wives' who came to them to claim their rights. The organisation's response is to take recourse to the legal justice system to negotiate with caste panchayats on securing the legal safeguards provided to married, separated or widowed women. Also unquestioned were issues of sexuality and morality inherent in the debate that the leader and staff were reluctant to open up for discussion. The leadership's public positions were known locally, and large numbers of women (who belonged to the organisations target group) who go in *naata* were excluded from the organisation's activities. What surfaced in this exchange was the challenges posed by the assumption of a position – that focuses on the rights of the wife - limits their ability to take on issues emerging from customary law. Equally, as the leaders pointed out, there were no forums or spaces where such issues are debated and discussed.

### **Accessing the Law: The Rights Discourse**

For the leadership working on VAW meant at least three important areas of intervention: establishing credibility with various State agencies and challenging their mindsets; raising funds, developing programmes and training staff; and thirdly, taking strategic decisions on cases.

Working on VAW involved regular interaction and confrontation with various State agencies. Thus building contacts with the police, administration, the courts, and organisations outside the district demanded time and energy of the leadership. There were times when the leadership had to sit in police stations all night. Officers were constantly transferred, contacts or rapport built over a period of time are not sustained and they have to start all over again with the newly transferred official. All the leaders and organisations studied had tactics to deal with different arms of the State. With the police and administration the relationship is built partly on the credibility of the organisation and leader and also by creating a sense of fear: the possibility of a women's *dharna* (people's protest). However, these institutions placed their own demands on women leaders: they were constantly challenged their knowledge and expertise regarding law and procedures, without which it was difficult to get these agencies to respond. As Mumtaz pointed out, 'I never drink tea in a police station. When we go for a case, I go prepared. I talk about the

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<sup>27</sup>Naata is a system where men and women in 'low caste' groups in tribal communities can separate after marriage, and are free to co-habit with another person. This second, third or even fourth alliance is not considered marriage but is termed 'naata' and has social sanction in the community. Technically, the option of *naata* is available to both men and women. Yet, in practice it is men who take the decision to bring women in *Naata* and the caste-based justice system leans towards their point of view. Women, who go in *naata* have no legal claims or rights to their husband's property and neither to the children they have borne during the course of their stay.

different provisions of the law and do not get into any analysis about the woman. It is important to engage with them on their terms.’ The leadership has had to deal with not only holding the police accountable to its procedures, but has battled mindsets among officers regarding both women and the communities they came from.

Malti

I used to spend a lot of time at the police station. The police would say a tribal woman cannot be raped. They would say it was consensual. These girls are like that only! I would often take women with me. Once Guddo’s mother (whose three-year-old daughter had been raped), a very strong woman said: ‘Has a three-year-old girl also had an affair?’

A major challenge was raising funds for this work. A small percentage of groups in the study were able to raise funds for violence-related work. Where this was the case, the leadership developed projects to work with women to access their legal entitlements by establishing for example, case-work cells, which allowed the organisation to engage with the system in a more structured manner. ‘Establishing such a cell meant that we could train our workers in a systematic manner on the law. It reduced the confusion; earlier, if a case was brought to the organisation everyone used to rush off and no one was assigned clear responsibilities.’ Setting up a cell of para-legal workers, mostly from the community, provided the leadership the possibility of keeping an ear to the ground and sustained follow-up with the women. Yet the challenges were immense: engaging with a legal system demands a high degree of legal knowledge. Building a team of lawyers to support the local staff has been the strategy to sustain their work on VAW.

When we look at the histories of the organisations, we see the phenomena of ‘dramatic or iconic cases’, which in the mind of the leadership, captured the significant moment when they felt they’d established leadership in the field. Many of these ‘dramatic cases’ were cases of violence that pushed the leadership into the limelight vis-à-vis the women, community, the State machinery and the local media. We share one case as an illustrative example.

In 1997 a woman from a powerful OBC caste died. It was not clear if it was murder or suicide. But she had a lot of injury marks on her body. This death took place in a village close to our town. We got news of the case from the SHG women in her village, who were all Dalit. They had heard her being beaten and crying for help. Her father-in-law was the principal of the town’s college. This was two days before Diwali and everything was shut. We went to find out about the post-mortem and saw both sides (parents and in-laws) in the hospital compound trying to work out a *samjhauta* (compromise).<sup>28</sup> A lawyer was making notes, and the girl’s father was present. The Pradhan, a local

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28 According to the Indian Penal Code, any case of reported death of a married woman, in the first seven years of her marriage is to be investigated by the police. If members of her natal family make an official complaint that their daughter was being harassed for dowry, then they come under the provisions of the Dowry Act. The accused can face arrest and criminal charges. Many families in this region, use this as a threat and take a payment from the boy’s family to not register a dowry case against this. This is what a ‘compromise’ entails.

politician, constables and the in-laws were also there. We did not say anything as this was a powerful caste in the area. It had become dark and the cremation was planned for the next morning.

We decided that something had to be done. We quickly went back and worked on posters and placards all night. The next morning when they were taking the body, we came with posters and banners that said, shame on her natal and marital family. It was a silent procession.

We went to the police, asking them why they could not file an FIR based on the injuries found on her body in the post-mortem report. She had also died due to consuming pesticide. The police pressured the father, who filed an FIR and then ran away to the village in fear of his daughter's powerful in-laws. Four days later, when we took out a procession against the in-laws, a lot of people came together, although there was a lot of fear amongst the SHG group women, many of whom were Dalit, that they would be accused of involving the organisation in this matter. Stones were pelted at us by the students and teachers of the Intermediate College. We then marched to the village and wrote slogans on the walls - 'This village supports violence against women', 'Deals are done over women's dead bodies' - and so on. We were close to 800 women from villages farther off in that block and from the neighbouring districts. The villagers were frightened at showing any support for us, as they feared a backlash from the powerful caste group that the woman came from.

After this case [October 1997] we started looking at newspapers, going to hospitals to identify such cases. We did many fact-finding visits around deaths of women under suspicious circumstances and found that this compromise was part of a larger pattern where inquiries into the death of many upper-caste women were 'closed' through such agreements.

With no resolution, why did this case become iconic? The experience of facing public wrath as a result of challenging or questioning those in authority made explicit the violence inherent in gender relations and in attempting to change them. It was not a brother, father, husband or other relative who was reacting and trying to control them, but the larger community. The violation moved from the individual to the collective. For Priti and her small team it was also a moment where they confronted patriarchy publicly, naturalised as part of daily social interactions. The structural links of violence became clear and evident - between families, the elected representatives and the law and order machinery. The leadership saw as concrete and lived the complexity of caste relations play out in conjunction with gender. The women in their forums were Dalits and protesting against this was not just a matter of protesting violence against women, but also upsetting the equilibrium that maintains caste relations. The leadership was able to read all this, and create a situation where both the team members and the women from the grassroots were able to be part of a protest. Naming and shaming the community together also broke the myth that the community is a homogenous entity. It was a moment when leadership was established not through individual interaction but through a large-scale public presence.

The leaders used the term 'jazba' (emotion and passion) to describe how they felt while taking on these cases. They pointed out that working on entitlements or even the creation

of livelihood resources did not have the 'charge' that taking on a case such as the ones above had, making it a public issue and taking on various structures of power. These iconic cases catapulted the leader into the public domain, established her identity and also her vision. The critical moment was in the decision made by the leaders, in both cases, as to which case to pick and turn into a public statement. That established their leadership; both in their own eyes and in the team they led.

## Being Female in 'The Field'

### Organisation F

We had gone to the police station regarding a case. There were a whole lot of us and an argument took place with the Station House Officer (SHO). He said, '*In ghagre waliaon ko chai pilao*' (Give tea to these women in skirts). Geeta was with us, she is hot tempered, she told him, '*nahin peeni thari chai, ghagre wali sab auratein hoti hain aur pant pehan kay tum aadmi ban gaye, aurton jaise koi kaam kar ke dikhao*' (I do not want to drink your tea. Yes, all those who wear skirts are women and by wearing trousers you have become a man. But show me if you can do even one task that women do.) I had to tell him she was crazy. Any way between us we got our work done.

Engaging with a system that is dominated by men brings its own risks for women leaders, who head organisations that have a majority of women workers. For these women, their mobility and confidence to engage with men is assumed to bring with it a possibility of being sexually promiscuous, and propositions for sexual favours come often in the call of duty. Sitting for hours, sometimes all night at police stations, to register a case or then approaching the police at odd hours translates to male officers seeking a 'payback in kind' to get work done.

These are not one-time interactions or aberrations, and women leaders develop multiple strategies to deal with them. The emerging leadership or the second-line leadership too has learnt the skills of negotiating and confronting the local police, through a range of strategies: prodding them, requesting them and questioning them. Groundwork on what the reputation of the officer is, and where the meeting will be held (it is a common practice to call women activists to their residences or at night), determines who will attend which meeting. Often the leaders act as the buffer between such propositions and their team members. Often team members will go in a group to ensure safety; communicate non-availability for meetings at odd hours, or put an older member on the case. As one second-line leader pragmatically pointed out, 'This is the risk involved in working with the police and in the courts. We will laugh with them and talk to them till our work is done and then as soon as it's done, we're off. You have to do this, if you want to get your work done.'

In their constant struggle with institutions of power, there is often no sense of progress where dealing with issues related to VAW is concerned. Their relationship with the law and order agencies is a tenuous one, and despite years of experience, getting the police to

respond is still a challenge for the leadership. Where groups work on child marriage, invariably, the police continue to be complicit with the community or family, informing families prior to the visit of the organisation, so that they can change the venue or date of the event to escape action. Even in their more recent attempts to take on cases, leaders spoke of how they continue to battle mindsets, just as they did a decade ago.

### **Malti**

Sometimes I feel very disillusioned. A women was hacked to death by her husband, her own gold nose ring was taken off and given as a bribe to the police. The police was refusing to file a complaint; we forced them to get a post mortem done. If you go to the police station to file a report in a rape case, they register it under eve teasing, saying that how can tribal women be raped? This is part of their culture.

When leaders and organisations have claimed the right to facilitate justice for women, many reported having been approached by powerful interests in the community to intervene and influence the process of decision-making. Therefore we see the leadership working at representing itself both in the community and with the State in different ways - from the facilitator of development schemes and benefits, to bringing in resources for the village, to challenging gender relations and the functioning of institutions. The latter, clearly is an area of conflict and an explicit expression of power that men exercise within the community and in the State. This is where women leaders positioned themselves distinctly, from other NGOs or male-headed agencies, and challenged the idea of what development or empowerment means for the community.



## **CHAPTER 5: LEADERSHIP STYLES WITHIN**

A key criterion for the selection of women leaders in this study was that they have been through the experience of registering their organisation, raising funds, implementing projects and managing staff of at least five persons. This arena of managing and building organisation is an important site where the leadership creates the structures and resources to carry forward the vision of the organisation in the field. Whatever might be her public persona, the organisation represents the internal world of the leader. This section maps this internal world of leadership through five domains of action:

1. Style of leadership
2. Structures and process
3. Culture setting
4. Raising Resources
5. Crisis Management

Here, a more intimate analysis of their processes of work within and the struggles of women leaders provides us an understanding of how power is exercised in these organisations. Leaders across organisations reflected on how, over time, the relation between the founder and the team had changed. While roles appeared to change, those in second-line, emergent leadership, continued to view the founder as holding the power to vision and steer the organisation.

### **Style of Leadership**

#### **'Follow the Leader'**

In most of the organisations featured in the study, the metaphor for the form of leadership that emerged was of a 'Kafila', a caravan where the woman leader who starts the organisation leads and others join in. The leader's role was to keep increasing the size of the caravan and to keep it moving and of course, to make critical decisions. If she managed to do this she was a successful leader. In the experiences that emerged, we see women leaders develop an intimate, relationship-based style of leadership, working in small teams intensively and engaging with team members. Some leaders remembered this as an early part of their journey, later moving on to larger staff and well-established offices. Some continue to work in this format.

## Team Building

An outcome of the Kafila mode is the emphasis on developing teams. The organisations and their leadership we observed built on the idea of collective responsibility, where the team can take their (and the organisation's) vision and mandate forward. All organisations had a core group with a sense of ownership of the organisation, which was distinct from project-based staff. This core group was an integral part of supporting the daily functioning of the organisation. Ideas related to participation and democratic functioning were discussed with this group and we saw members of this group increasingly becoming part of decision making, moving from an apprenticeship stage to running of the organisation in substantive ways. But along with this, the role of the leadership too kept transforming.

Skills of raising resources, organisational design and functioning were assimilated in a 'learning by doing' mode by the leaders themselves. For many among this leadership group, working in the field with women and identifying their issues was their *jazba* – their passion to make a change at the field level. They were advocates of justice, empowerment and rights, but as Mumtaz said, 'Our faces were turned towards the field', rather than outwards. Malti described this as a sense of freedom to determine and focus on what was important:

During that time I used to work a lot. What a racket I made. Till a case did not reach its conclusion I did not let it go. That was the time we made women's groups. Now it is different. I did not have worries then. I did not have to send a report to anyone. There was no tension.

As their organisations grew, the leaders' own roles became increasingly tied to fund raising, writing proposals and working through the structural design of their organisation. They wittingly or unwittingly became the face of their organisation to the outside world and their contact with the field became limited. Their energies centred on building a second-line leadership in their organisations, which was local, committed and capable of handling the field with conviction and confidence. They did not have skills of documentation, reporting and of communicating in English – almost all leaders identified this as the biggest challenge they faced.

**TABLE 1: Proportion of Time on Tasks of Women Leaders**

<b>First-line Leaders</b>	<b>Focus of Work</b>
Providing direction and vision	50%
Planning activities and guiding implementation	46.5%
Resource mobilisation	38%
Mentoring new entrants	19.7%
<b>Second-line Leaders</b>	
Providing direction and vision	45%
Planning activities and guiding implementation	51.6%
Mentoring new entrants	32.3%

The pattern thus was of leadership leaving project implementation to a committed second line (see Table 1 above). Kanika in second-line leadership described this in the following way:

Organisation A

Within the organisation, it is ultimately [the founder] but she is quite democratic. She will tell us, then plan, then I delegate duties, decide who will do what and where, I don't have to ask her. In our project we have team meetings where we delegate duties and tasks are allocated. First we discuss, everyone puts forward their ideas, we note it down and then we share with the leader. She will give her inputs, and then we have a staff meeting. We train new staff, go over the budget.

Here we see the leader engage with her senior team in a manner that draws them in on crucial issues. Her role is that of a planner and to provide inputs and feedback. Even the role of mentoring, which was played by the leader in the earlier phase is now carried out (in some areas) by the second-line leadership.

There is recognition that leadership involved managing all manner of tensions and conflicts among team members and working to keep the team together. This means drawing on their weight as founders, using personal charisma and their long experience and knowledge of the field – all expressions of power. In order to decentralise and move out of certain roles, leaders expressed ambiguities around exercising power.

Mumtaz

I like to work as a team. I don't like to be a boss and don't encourage people to boss over others. The fact however is that I am the team leader of Organisation E. I have to raise funds and can find time to visit villages only when there is a special need. In the past one-and-a-half years I have moved away from the office (and live an hour away) and also my age is catching up with me. And so now I want to look at other things, do other things.

## **Structures and Processes**

As leadership established itself, the organisation took 'shape and form'. Projects were the medium through which more formal structures of functioning were established. Increase in staff, resources and tasks brought in issues of management and design for the leaders. While the leadership had a clear sense of how they would like to structure the grassroots-level sangathans, as mentioned in Chapter 4, such clarity was not visible in terms of their own organisational structure. The few who had clarity, modelled their organisations on their exposure or experience of working elsewhere.

Projects generated creative energy but also created confusion and internal tensions. Their relationship vis-à-vis each other or in the organisation's overall structure was not

discussed or then was not seen to be critical. For some organisations, the coming of projects meant an identification and division of workers according to agencies that funded different projects. This often had disastrous implications for team dynamics, since ownership was towards projects and their targets, rather than to the organisation and its vision. A subsequent area of confusion was team members' identities beyond the project-based roles. In general we see such confusions at two levels - when an organisation separated from a parent NGO, and when an organisation set itself up separately from the grassroots-level groups that they had established and registered in some cases.

### **The Case of Organisation F**

Organisation F was registered in a situation where a women's Manch (grassroots collective) was already in existence, as part of a parent NGO's efforts. It was the parent NGO's vision that the Manch be independent and self-reliant. To strengthen the Manch, it was decided that another NGO be registered with the aim of exclusively supporting and sustaining the Manch. The programme coordinator from the parent NGO was to take the lead on this. Rural women from the grassroots Manch came on to the Board and executive committee along with a few local leaders from the town with higher educational skills. Thus the NGO 'F' emerged from a grassroots structure and was registered.

But they soon realised that it was not that simple. A preponderance of members in the organisation and the board were semi-literate or neo literates, which meant constraints in reporting and drafting proposals. In the transition period of three years from the parent NGO the leader expressed that she and other members often felt confused about which 'hat' they were wearing, '*Baar Baar pehchan badalni padtithi* (we had to keep changing our identity), we were playing many roles. The newly-registered organisation was unable to raise funds. Funds continued to be routed through the parent NGO; as a result they had nothing to show on their balance sheet.

This is an interesting experience of how, in contrast to other organisations that were first founded by individuals and which took on the task of organising rural women, here we see a grassroots formation attempting to create an NGO, as a means to sustain and promote its work. The leadership articulates it clearly - that structures determine the nature of work. Clearly, what the leadership of the rural women's collective did successfully did not pass muster for establishing an NGO. The overlap between the two identities created challenges for the leader, who came from a middle-class background and who had a university level degree herself. At times she was expected to hold back to allow the Manch women to emerge and at points she alone was burdened with the responsibility of writing proposals, and dealing with crises for the new organisation. Structures therefore represent aspirations of a particular kind: in this instance, the women's collective was seeking to enhance its own outreach to a new set of stakeholders, to be 'autonomous' of its parent NGO and of the local state machinery to do its work. Raising resources to undertake this work and make it sustainable was at the heart of this shift, but there were tensions around whether an empowered women's leadership of the manch could be replicated in the NGO format.

## **Carving Separate Spaces**

The development of particular forums, particularly the formation of a 'women's wing' in identity-based groups that include both men and women, point to how the evolution of structures reflect the gendering of work and issues in NGOs. However, it is not merely a case of pushing women on to 'gender only' spaces; it also reflects an assertion by the emerging women's leadership to claim its space. For the men, it allows them to relocate into the safe and secure space of more formal politics.

### **The Case of Organisation G**

Here, a structural separation between women's issues and the work on Dalit rights emerged over a decade of work within the organisation. The push for separation appears to have come from a recognition amongst the women that 'till the men were around, an independent women's leadership would not emerge'. Thus a Farm Worker's Union was registered along with the Women's Forum. The leader of the Women's Forum took on the state coordinator-ship and other women moved into district-level positions. Committees of five women were set up at the village level to strengthen their field-based presence. Dalit women saw this as an opportunity to push their agendas both in the state-level network (where they were members) and at the district level.

The leaders contrasted the working and leadership styles of both organisations. In the case of the Farm Workers' Union, where majority of the office bearers are men, power is centralised and district and village members are not part of decision making. In the Women's Forum, district committees and coordinators had some decision-making role along with the state executive. There is a greater dispersal of power and authority in the Women's organisation. This division appears to be related to perceptions regarding women's leadership: in the case of women the emphasis is on allowing women the space to express and develop their leadership; for men the need is to bring them under the command of a leadership that is decisive.

Since the separation there has been a re-alignment in the work focus of the Women's Forum. Their work on women and violence includes not just Dalit women but other communities and castes as well. Yet, where the men's organisation comes to represent the more formal domain of politics - land, resources, wages - and represents the Dalit identity, the women's forum locates itself in marking Dalit women's issues and struggles as those in relation to the State, and over time the 'woman' identity is at the centre of this advocacy. Women are not really the carriers of caste identity and such structural shifts might express this idea in implicit ways. Women leaders in the organisation, viewed the formalisation of their structure and posts as allowing women to 'formally' be recognised as leaders, something that they had struggled with in the organisation.

## **Setting the Culture of the Organisation**

The culture of an organisation includes the entire gamut of its values, ideas of equality, gender equity, negotiations around relationship of power and hierarchy within and the politics of knowledge and identity embedded in the everyday practices of the organisation. For a leadership that works on the idea of gender equity and with women from

marginalised communities and poor backgrounds, this creates its own challenges. Handling the daily functioning and setting the tone and tenor of how interactions will take place falls on the shoulders of the leader. The leaders we interviewed had team members that include women and men from the local community, one that is located in a patriarchal and unequal society. This defines the worldview that their team members enter the organisation with.

### **Selecting and Mentoring Team Members**

What sets these organisations and their leaders apart is the patience and nature of investments made to draw women out of difficult situations and into the world of work. These were ordinary women, many with very basic educational qualifications, but the leaders noticed a spark in them, and patiently built their skills. Several organisations drew on the women who became associated with them through their own experiences of violence, to become part of the team. They believed that women who have struggled or are in the process of fighting for their rights are more likely to identify with and commit themselves to the organisation. In some organisations, this was even articulated in the hiring policy. The narratives of several women, who are now in a leadership position, do reveal this deep bonding with the organisation.

The onus of thinking through their growth and providing opportunities for team members to learn lay with the leadership. Organising trainings, exposure trips and training people on the job was part of the idea of building the stakes of the team in the work of the organisation. That this has largely been a successful, if time-consuming strategy was evident in the confidence with which young second-line-level woman leaders talked about their work and the cases they have handled.

### **Of Men and Skills, Changes in Organisational Demands**

For some groups, men entered the organisations as they grew or new areas of work were undertaken. In the process of creating a land rights forum for both men and women in the community in Organisation H, male staff was needed to organise the men in the villages. The work of the forum required considerable skills of dealing with legalities related to land and paper work. Being a tribal area, such skills were not available with the women team members. Therefore, while the Community Forum had a 50% membership of women, many of whom were articulate, they gradually became less active in the Forum. The male workers in the organisation too increasingly took on the responsibilities of following up on the paper work along with the men in the community in the land records department, with the courts, the administrative machinery, etc.

A similar situation emerged in Organisation E, when their work on children's education required skills of data processing and report writing, which only staff with better reporting and computer skills could handle. In both these organisations, in the initial phase of work there was a strong policy of hiring women who came with their own cases from the field. Classic hierarchies became evident, where those with higher education and computer skills held senior and better paid management posts, while those with limited education skills, continued to fill the field worker positions. Women typically fell into the second category. The skill divide became a gender divide in many groups with mixed staff. The leadership, meanwhile, struggled with the pressures of meeting project reporting requirements, which compelled them to compromise their own vision and strategy of identifying and nurturing community-level women into leadership.

Many of the leaders cope with this situation by hiring consultants from big cities like Mumbai, Delhi etc. Their presence is marginal to, and distant from the team. But hiring people for senior positions who are expected to manage communication and correspondence with funders created complicated power dynamics within teams. Thus, while professionalism and skills are being demanded by funders from field-based organisations, the second-line leadership of field-based organisations are dominated by those with limited 'professional' qualifications but who have a long experiences and commitment. The result is often a core group created by the leader, which has a combination of both kinds of people, and who report directly to her rather than one another. So the leader is the one who holds both together and institutes processes of collective discussion and reflection.

### **The Politics of Making Tea – Office Management and Other Battles**

Management of the office involved struggles where male staff typically expected to be served tea by the women – 'As they could do it better'. Women too assumed responsibility for such tasks, as this was familiar to them, an extension of what they did in their domestic space. The leadership has pushed these boundaries, drawing on their authority as founders, setting up an organisational culture counter to this assumption. The men in the organisation found it a struggle to work with women colleagues who were assertive and articulate. Leaders also felt that male staffs' commitment to women's issues required constant revisiting. Their ownership on issues of Land Rights, education or community rights on forest produce kept them engaged, but a similar engagement was lacking in terms of engaging with issues of violence against women. Leaders pointed out that these are areas of continuous struggle.

## Caste and Identity Within

For the staff in the organisation, breaking norms pertaining to eating and cooking included challenging not only gender hierarchies but also their own caste-based taboos. For the leaders it represented their own commitment to the idea of equality. As a second-line leader described, 'I ate with X without knowing that she belongs to Y caste [a very low caste]. When I realised, I couldn't eat for days. I felt weird inside. But now I don't feel that way.' Bringing together women on one platform in this way at times also flattens out the reality of difference. In organisation B, the strategy was to deny any association with the caste they belonged to, the assumption being that, not using caste in public offices and in the community translated to getting work done on the basis of their values and vision. However, denying caste to create a level field also closes conversations within the team as to the subtle and multiple ways in which caste privilege and status manifests itself.

A significant aspect of the creation of caste hierarchies is the categorisation of certain tasks as polluting. Those associated with performing these tasks are located at the bottom of the caste hierarchy. Cleaning the toilet is one such ritually impure task, allocated to the lowest of the low. In an effort to challenge these caste-based hierarchies of work, the leadership of organisation D took the (very unpopular) decision that staff would take turns to clean the office toilet, including the leadership. This rule (of rotational cleaning duties) came into existence when the organisation's leadership took the decision to set up a Dalit women's federation. The experience of forming a Dalit women's forum led to not just a questioning of caste relations within the community but of taking these questions into the organisation too.

### Deepa

The experience of implementing this rule [of rotational cleaning duties] also had a great impact on how we then presented ourselves to the women we worked with. In 2006 we had a big mela of our Dalit women's federation. Of course we did the usual thing of getting women from the all castes to cook '*Halwa*' (a sweet dish) on stage, which was eaten by the 200 women participating. But what was planned by the leadership was that the staff would clean the toilets. The next morning we all wore little caps on our heads that marked our caste. Someone was Brahmin, Gupta, Yadav, Kurmi, Harijan. All with brooms in their hands, brushes and buckets and we cleaned all the toilets at the venue. The Dalit women were staring at us as we sang, danced and cleaned toilets.

Clearly this was a dramatic statement made by the leadership, challenging and questioning the notion of who can do what work and whether this is or does make one 'impure'. The leaders, or *didis* (elder sister; also used to address someone more senior or experienced) who come for meetings, bring information and train them acquire a status. Despite all assertions of equality, this does not challenge what is at the core of caste relations: the



nature of labour performed and the categorisation of mental labour as superior and the body as performing lower, menial tasks. It was only after the organisation had struggled with this idea internally, had put it into practice in their own everyday functioning, could the leadership actually take the team along to perform this act publicly with a clarity as to its significance. Also, wearing the cap and identifying the caste of each of the staff members cleaning toilets was to make explicit that their privilege was also to be questioned by the Dalit women. It was easy to critique the upper castes in their village but did that perspective inform their interactions with the members/staff of the NGOs too?

### *Practising Positive Discrimination*

The decision to hire women with their own cases of violence as workers in the organisation was challenging in terms of coping with their limited educational skills as pressures to document and report grew on the leadership from funders. But two questions that emerged when we probed issues of identity within organisations were a) was there adequate representation of marginalised communities in the team and b) did they find space in the leadership and decision-making roles or positions of power in the organisation? In the case of Organisation D, the strategy to deal with the first question was to put forward a reservation policy to ensure more Dalit, Muslim and Tribal women came into the organisation.

Arshi, a first-line leader shared her experience of entering the organisation, 'I (a Muslim candidate) interviewed with a Sahu/Gupta girl (general caste). She dressed better, spoke better and presented herself better. She would have got the job for sure. You always give the job to the best candidate. I was shocked when I got the job.' While the effort was to bring in women and men from marginalised groups, it was not without its challenges. The leadership shared how older workers raised questions and charged the organisational leadership with practicing reverse discrimination vis-à-vis upper-caste women candidates, who also needed to earn. Candidates from these communities who were unable to perform, despite inputs and support, had to be asked to leave. This put a lot of pressure on the leadership, in terms of the time and energy required of them to build skills and perspective of team members. Despite these challenges the leadership was clear that if they did away with the reservation policy in the organisation, they are likely to get better qualified girls who can type, handle computers, etc. but then there would be no Dalit or Muslim team members in the organisation.

While they promoted reservation for Dalits and Muslims, have built and support a 3,000 strong Dalit women's forum, the leadership of Organisation D did not see themselves as a Dalit organisation. 'Who is in leadership affects the identity that the organisation wishes to portray. We work mostly for women, Dalit women, but we do not say we are a Dalit organisation. We say we work with Dalits. There is a difference. Our women's sangathan says it is a Dalit organisation, working as and for Dalits.' Part of this resistance came from identifying as a feminist organisation, and part of it came from their desire to not be solely

identified with the Dalit identity. 'If a Dalit man hits or murders his wife we will raise a voice against him and his family. This is something that a Dalit rights group will not do. We will also not go against women. We will not take up a case where we find that the woman has done something that we do not agree with, but we will not take a stand against her.'

Fraught inter-community relations and potential conflict over inter-religious issues also at times created situations where Mumtaz in Organisation E was forced to take decisions that were not in keeping with her political or ideological position.

One of our young Muslim woman workers was fighting her own case with her husband. She lived with her parents and brothers. At one point, there was a fight in her family and she walked out of her natal home. She started living with a Hindu family who were very caring and nurturing of her. People started talking and casting aspersions on the organisation and the leader saying, 'Is this what you are teaching girls, that they start living in Hindu families'. Her brother and family took no responsibility for having created this situation. I started feeling very tense and worried about her decision. Although in principle she had a right to stay where she felt happy, I was worried that this could be a volatile case. Riots too could happen. I discussed with the team and they too agreed that all manner of rumours were rife, that the worker was participating in Hindu prayer rituals. We took the decision that we have to convince her that she goes back to her family or then live separately. So I and some senior team members spoke with her. She finally moved back to her parents as she found the idea of living along not in keeping with the general culture there.

Muslim leaders constantly felt under scrutiny, in terms of their nature of work and who they represented, 'We are accused of working only with Muslims. Hindu team members are not asked why they only work with Hindus.' While these questions reflect an assumption that Muslims are best led by members of their own community, there is also the reverse assumption that Muslims cannot lead rights-based work in other communities. Challenging these powerful assumptions over a period of time is difficult. What we saw over some of the organisational histories was a shift towards working and focusing on the community that the leadership belongs to. If the leader was Dalit then despite specific interventions with Muslim women, a greater response by the Dalit community resulted in the leadership increasingly engaging with women from the Dalit community. We saw a similar drift with organisations headed by Muslim women.

### *Sexuality*

The leaders often believed that they had a 'sorted out' view on sexuality: they saw it as an issue related to women's rights, of working women being at a disadvantage vis-à-vis other male workers, or in terms of women having the right to make choices outside prescribed gender norms. However, gossip, discomfort at staff meetings and ultimately the repercussions of certain situations and decisions in the field were what determined how

these matters were dealt with by the leadership. Leaders felt that at times despite their efforts to address these issues sensitively it was difficult to act on what they believed in.

### **Radhika**

Two of our team members got into a relationship. The girl was local and the boy an outsider. People outside got word and the team came back and told me that people are talking. When I spoke to the girl she refused outright. But the boy acknowledged that they were involved. I asked if he saw a future in the relationship and he said he would ask his family. I went back to the girl and she still refused. The staff got very agitated and put a lot of pressure on me to ask the girl to leave, as everyone was talking, and the organisation's reputation was at stake. The girl was going deeper into depression. By now the boy came back and said that his family had refused to accept the relationship. I took power into my hands and decided as a compromise that if anyone has to leave it will be the boy. The girl as it is had her heart broken, and to have her turned away from the organisation would be too much. There was pressure from the team but also from the community as she was from the neighbouring village. *Jis mahaul mein hum rehrehen hain, us mein unka jeena haram hai* (the environment in which we live it became impossible for her to survive). When we know what the societal norms are it is wrong to ask the girl to leave.

Here the leadership of Organisation A intervened to take a unilateral decision in favour of the girl. However often supporting women staff members who break sexual norms posed a challenge for the leadership. The workers, especially women who come from the community, found it difficult to support their colleagues who break gender norms. Close monitoring by workers – who are concerned about how their image in the community will be affected by such relationships – and the community itself, makes it difficult if not impossible for women leaders to take stands that support transgressive behaviour.

### **Organisation C**

One of our team members was married and was friendly with someone else. He would drop her and pick her up for the office. Once she went away with him. We did not know but she told her family that she had gone for a work-related meeting. We got a call from her house asking where we had sent her. We tried calling her but her phone was switched off. Later the staff said that such an act damages the organisation's reputation. I wanted to talk to her, she asked me to hear her out. But I had to take this decision [to ask her to leave] because of the team. She is still in economic difficulty I know, but team *ka bada dabav bana hua hai. Aur main apne man ko daba liya hai us ke bare main* (The team put a lot of pressure. And I had to suspend my own decision regarding her situation).

The dilemmas that leaders faced at times emerged from the fragility of their own situations and identities - as single women, with high mobility and a public presence. The need to be seen as 'good women', working on socially acceptable issues and promoting socially acceptable values was something that could not be shaken off easily. As Swati pointed out 'We have to take these tough decisions. We are breaking so many other stereotypes that being a good woman vis-à-vis maintaining sexual norms becomes very important.' Yet,

when these matters concern girls or women in their federations, for instance an inter-caste marriage, the team supported them, as that is seen to be of value to the group. Clearly it was about assessing the impact on the organisation and the character of the organisation, despite contradictions in which norms applied to whom.

With little training on sexuality that may provide them tools for a critique or feminist understanding, the leadership in these organisations, including second-line leadership, have struggled with these issues. The boundaries between what is private and what is public, and whether there is space for breaking certain social norms related to sexuality within the organisation was unclear. Those leaders who view themselves as feminist and have a critique of patriarchy have had to battle their own discomfort, constantly reflecting on whether they have taken the right decisions.

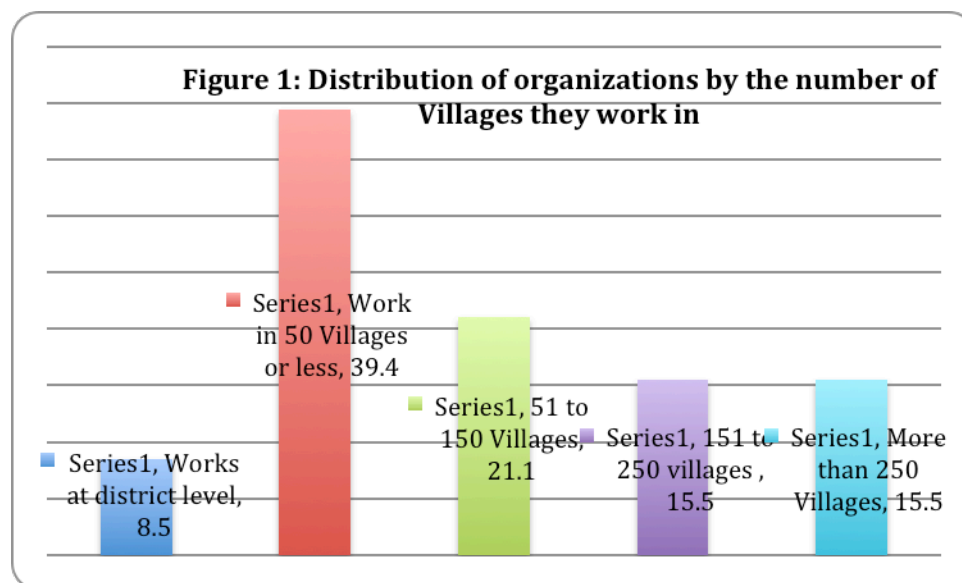
To conclude, the internal domain of these small town or rural NGOs mirrored the external environment in terms of how caste, religion and gender hierarchies manifest themselves. As is evident in the section above, the leadership did not have a flat or static notion of gender equality and was therefore watchful and actively pushing for building more democratic ways in which members could engage with one another. The challenges were immense and complex, and leaders chose to either weather out certain issues or then tackle them head on with their staff. These issues were part of the domain of action of the women leaders and their ability to act on these issues was a dynamic part of their role.

## **Raising Financial Resources**

In order to understand the concerns of leadership discussed in this study in terms of raising financial resources, it is important to understand the larger context of the organisations, in terms of financials, scale of operation and staff.

We see this kind of leadership working mostly in the range of 50 to 150 villages, with a limited staff of 5 to 15 workers, and more volunteers. This has resulted in the leadership running small organisations with intensive engagement in the field through volunteers. Expansion of work and increase in projects implied interactions with funders, negotiating work, resources and establishing credibility. For young organisations working at the grassroots level, the initial phase was one where large funds were not sought. Later we see a move by a majority of the leaders to increase their access to resources and funds. Funds were raised for computers, laptops, light scooters and to open more field-based offices. From a time where the homes of leaders doubled as office spaces, now organisations were in a position to set up a separate space to function.

From the quantitative data on the scale of operation, 40% of these organisations worked in less than 50 villages – in some cases as low as 10 to 15 villages; 15% worked in a larger number of villages – more than 250 villages, with close to 22% being in the bandwidth of 51 to 150 villages. (See Figure 1 below)



In terms of number of paid staff, as seen in Table 2 below, we see an almost similar percentage of organisations with more than 15 employees and those with staff between 6 and 15 workers. 22.5 % worked with a small team of five or less than five workers. However, the quantitative study indicated a high involvement of volunteers by the leadership. Leaders depended on volunteers to sustain their work in villages (See Table 3).

**TABLE 2: Distribution of Organisations by Number of Paid Staff**

Number of Paid Staff	Number	Percent
No paid staff	5	7.0
Paid staff less than or equal to 5	16	22.5
Paid staff between 6 and 15	24	33.8
Paid staff of more than 15	26	36.6
Total	71	100.0

**TABLE 3: Distribution of Organisations by Number of Volunteers**

Number of Volunteers	Numbers	Percent
No volunteer	3	4.2
Volunteers less than or equal to 5	12	16.9
Volunteers between 6 and 15	18	25.4
Volunteers between 16 and 75	23	32.4

More than 75	15	21.1
Total	71	100.0

The dependence on volunteers can be looked at from two perspectives. Village- level mobilisation and support has to be provided by motivated persons, and volunteers are well suited for this work. Volunteerism is a one of the strengths of such field-based organisations where every village can be supported through a volunteer. But there are other types of work which require full-time involvement, and it is difficult to sustain this on a volunteer's inputs. So while this is a remarkable way of working it is not an ideal one, particularly in cases where leaders are forced to depend on voluntarism because of shortage of funds rather than as a strategy for mobilising.

### **Funds and Assets**

Average annual budgets of the organisations were small for nearly one-third of the organisations surveyed – less than 5 lakhs.<sup>29</sup> Quite a few among them said they barely survived on loans and individual donations and as a result were unable to make a work plan. A few were going through severe financial crisis and were dependent on individual donations, or self generation. They could not talk of any annual budget as there was no budget.

On the other extreme, a little more than 20% of the organisations had a budget of over 50 lakhs. There appears to be a state-wise difference in this aspect. Uttarakhand organisations reported smaller budgets with hardly any with more than 50 lakhs a year, while a few organisations in the other two states reported better access to funds (See Table 4).

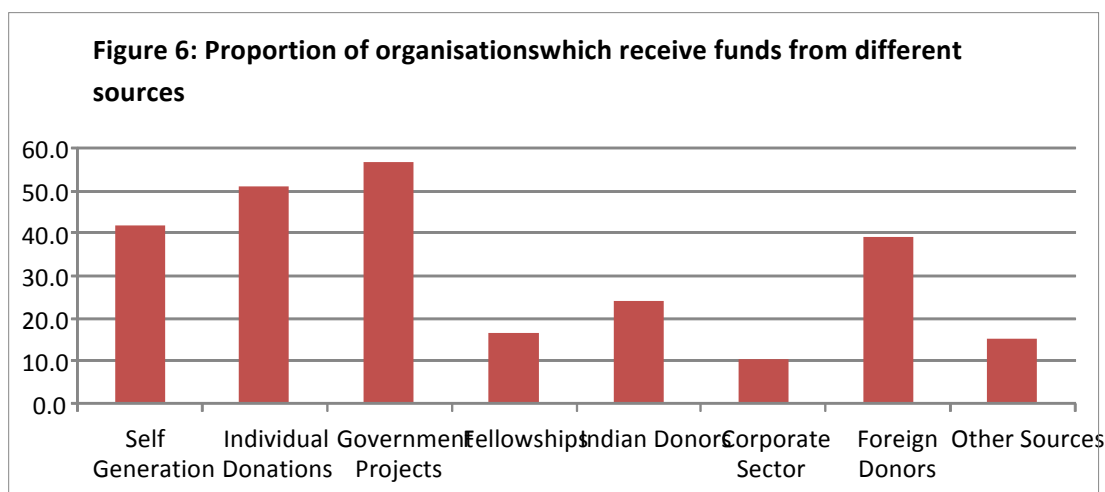
**TABLE 4: Distribution of Organisations by Annual Budget**

<b>Annual Average Budget of the Org. in the Last 3 Years</b>	<b>Percent</b>
5 Lakhs and Below	32.4
Between 5 and 10 Lakhs	14.1
Between 10 to 30 Lakhs	25.4
Between 30 to 50 Lakhs	7.0
Between 50 Lakhs to 1 Crore	9.9
More than 1 Crore	11.3
Total	100.0

<sup>29</sup> The respondents were asked about their source of funds and size of their annual budget over the preceding 3 years. The responses to questions on budget and funding were not always forthcoming and so it is possible that several organisations, particularly the ones with larger budgets, understated their funds.

The asset inventories too reflected lack of funds. Nearly 60% of the organisations worked from a rented office. The most common asset which all organisations reported owning was a computer. In addition more than half possessed power backup such as a generator or an inverter. Though their work is spread over several villages, 70% had a two-wheeler and the rest had no conveyance. 22% of the organisations owned a car or a jeep.

Data about what were the main sources of funds and the proportion of funds from each source (and not the amount of money received), <sup>30</sup> indicated that many organisations depend on self generation and individual donations. Government projects were important for more than half the organisations. The corporate sector played a small role, contributing barely 10% of the total share of funding in these women-led organisations. Foreign donations funded a relatively larger proportion of organisations - close to 40% of these organisations' funds came from foreign sources. However, the major sources of support were government projects, individual donations and self generation by the group and its leadership (See Figure 2 below).



The average annual budget had some correlation with different funding sources. The organisations with annual budgets of less than 10 lakh rupees (less than 17000 USD) received funds from government sources, apart from which they self generated income or received individual donations to run their organisations. Very few organisations in this category received funds from other sources. The organisations with large annual budgets – those above Rs 50 lakhs (83,000 USD or above) received funds from various sources – government projects and foreign donations are prominent among these. Other sources are also important. Those which depend on fellowships are the small-budget ones - but the

<sup>30</sup> Four organisations did not respond to the question - three of them because they did not have any funds in the current year.

fellowships have proved to be a very important part of their funds and sometimes all project expenses are met by the few who received fellowships.

In their association with funders, the location of the leadership is important to underline. Leaders talked of the power dynamics generated around location (being grassroots organisations as compared with big city ones); lack of command over English which resulted in feeling inadequate about not being able to present their work effectively; and the lack of other skills related to data management, reporting requirements etc. Researchers heard quotes like the one below repeatedly: 'We have learnt everything here on the job, we have come from government schools where English was taught from Class 6 (instead of from primary level) We try and manage to the best of our capacity but it is a challenge.' Where funders were able to bridge this, build on their agendas and issues in the field and provide them (the leadership) some capacity building, the interaction was seen to affirm their leadership.

#### **Deepa**

We have had a very good relationship with X, an equal relationship. They gave us a wider platform to voice our concerns. It gave us a different perspective on the issues we work on. They were part of the process of our organisation establishing itself and striking root, in building our foundation .... they don't have a rigid way of functioning, you can work whichever way you want. They had some objectives, but you could set your own agenda.

The mainstream image of NGOs is that they are out to make money. Amongst the women leaders we noticed an element of pride and a desire not be viewed as 'other NGOs', who might take on projects purely for financial benefits. There is recognition too and a desire for a more equal relationship with funders along with a need for new learning opportunities, access to different forums and perspectives. Leaders acknowledged that their association with certain funders gave them opportunities to link up with larger campaigns and networks, taking them out of a specific local context to gain a macro picture on the issues they worked on.

### **Challenges and Contradictions**

Flexibility, support and respect were the terms that the leadership viewed as the key to setting up positive, synergetic relations with funders. Yet when these were absent in the interactions, working together became difficult.

#### **Urmila**

Y also gave us a chance to understand and build our perspective on the issue of Z, they supported us, built capacities .... But we withdrew from them because they became very arrogant. *Malik aur naukar ka rishta ban gaya* (It became a master-servant relationship). They started harassing our workers. There was no feeling of partnership or equality. Here we are talking of equality in our organisation and the funder is treating us in an imperialist manner.



Not only at the level of the organisation but also at the field level, funders desire to capture change and impact resulted in the leadership struggling to keep their processes of work and values intact.

### **Organisation B**

XY sent the media to cover our work. They came in many cars and did a lot of shooting, spoke to several people and then printed nothing. When there was no coverage, we felt that they were cheating both the community and the issue. We made a policy that anything of this nature will be approved by us before it is to be printed or filmed. They said they want to come here and give an award to our workers. We said we don't want to be involved in this. We do not rank our workers; they are doing their best as per their capacity.

Leaders expressed a need to maintain their control over the field and organisational mandate, especially in situations where mandates and work were significantly shifted by funders. This has resulted in considerable internal struggle in the leaders' minds which have not necessarily been shared by others in their team. In the case of Organisation E, despite increased funds signalling growing clout to the external world, for the leader it represented feeling a loss of control over her team: funders would sit in on the hiring process, and call project staff directly. She knew in her gut that becoming project focused was sidelining them from their core issues. While reflecting on this she stated – '*man se narivadi hai par paise ki vajah se hum delivery ka kaam karna chahte hai* (We are feminists in our hearts but for funds we have taken on delivery-oriented work)'. The organisation shifted to working with children and youth partly recognising that greater funds were available for work in this area, and partly convincing themselves that if they remained true to their commitment to gender equality, they could reach that goal by working in a different sector.

Some leaders experience of bringing in projects marked a radical departure on how they wished to engage with the community and the State. For instance the shift from organising women to demand from the State through protests and campaigns gave way to working with mothers and children on education, health and child rights in one organisation and in another it moved to implementation of livelihood programmes. As Mumtaz pointed out, 'We also began working with the government in a more non-adversarial role - give a little, share a little. We began taking on the government by fighting them with our survey data and numbers not through protest.' For someone who worked on the immediacy of women's demands and the importance of combating and pressurising the State machinery to respond, this move could be read as de-politicising. Yet she juxtaposed this with the need to survive in the area, to establish a permanent presence and have a degree of stability for her new team. Thus, while being critical of the shifts they were pushed to make, the leaders were also aware that battling with the State and the community could not sustain their

leadership. As Mumtaz put it, 'One kind of politics (feminist politics) has to be suppressed in order for another to survive.'

### **Being Women in the Fundraising Arena**

Raising funds for organisations as women has its share of benefits and limitations. Certain funders insist that women must be in leadership in order for them to make a grant. There are projects that are focused on women's participation – resulting in women's organisations being better placed to access such funds. However accessing funds means building a relationship and networks with different individuals. 'Women leaders are at a disadvantage. If the funding agency is male headed, we cannot stay back late with them, dine and drink with them and this might affect our chances.'

Women in leadership also felt that assumptions are made regarding their sexuality, 'One man called me at night. He was staying at the Training Resource Centre and he asked me to meet him there. I refused, and asked him to see me in my office in the morning. Then he said meet me in X town (a neighbouring tourist town). I told him I have no time for this, I am married with kids.' As a result, building a relationship with funders required both skills and a constant assessment of their own boundaries vis-à-vis the field, their staff, their mandate and vision.

### **Funding Work on Violence**

Across the board, leaders pointed out that raising funds for VAW related work has been the most difficult and organisations marked it as one of the biggest challenges they face today. Much is determined by how committed the leadership is to sustaining work in this area, and often leaders piggy-backed on project-related travel funds to fund taking up cases of VAW. Some funders have been flexible in allowing the NGO to bring on board some aspects of VAW work, 'For instance, funders who are supporting work on adolescent girls - in their case we have incorporated casework into their project, make allocations for support to the victim, medical aid, etc. We have that space to manoeuvre and negotiate with most of our funders. Plus we do trainings to generate funds.' Thus, squirreling away small amounts from their existing work is one major strategy that leaders adopt to sustain work in this area.

Other leaders however pointed out that an increasingly result-oriented framework has affected support to VAW work in the field. Funders have divided regions they will work in, and within this the issues that will be funded are also clearly defined. Many leaders pointed out that in the existing preoccupation of funders on a cost-benefit analysis of how they spend their money, the emphasis on statistics and indicators to quantify success rates and

evaluate impact is not conducive to presenting VAW work. Deepa aptly pointed out the contradiction,

The proposal requires us to state how many victims we will support. We fought them on that. How can we predict this? It is difficult to give outcomes and indicators on VAW. The problems of violence are manifold. Even in the X project, we are going by the premise that if we spread awareness, violence will not happen, whereas when we spread awareness we get more cases. So it's a paradoxical situation.

Additionally, behavior change through mere trainings and workshops does not capture the pervasiveness of violence as a means of power and control, in their view, and it required sustained, focused investments for any change to occur.

All the leaders felt that funders arrive with their agendas clearly defined and that their approach has become virtually to see NGOs as implementers of these agendas. Some felt that the way forward is to look at local women's grassroots groups supporting this work on their own resources. Others also viewed this lack of financial support as a function of their location as rural leaders. They were in competition with more high-profile, urban, women's rights groups which made it difficult to access financial resources for this work.

Mumtaz

There has been a *saajish* (conspiracy) I will say. There was a change in the laws (the Domestic Violence act) and at that time, Foreign Contributions Regulations Act (FCRA) certificates were being withdrawn.<sup>31</sup> It felt like the government was saying, we have given them laws but we won't allow any money to go to them. Also the fact is that rural organisations get left out because we don't know how to use the internet. Our voice does not reach funders, they do not know where or how to find us.

## Managing Crisis – Within and Outside

Crisis is a moment in leadership that creates different opportunities for leadership to develop. The examples below show how different crisis situations have been responded to by the organisations.

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<sup>31</sup> The purpose of the FCRA is to regulate and prohibit acceptance and utilisation of foreign contribution for any activities detrimental to the national interest. This Act covers Non-Profit Organisations (NPOs) amongst others, and lays out norms regarding how and on what activities can foreign donations be utilised for. NGOs that receive foreign, donor money directly are to report their financial transactions to the Ministry of Home Affairs on an annual basis. Cancellation of FCRA number by the government is a real threat for those NGOs who are critical of the State. See [http://lawmin.nic.in/ld/regionallanguages/THE%20FOREIGN%20CONTRIBUTION%20\(REGULATION\)%20ACT,2010.%20\(42%20OF%202010\).pdf](http://lawmin.nic.in/ld/regionallanguages/THE%20FOREIGN%20CONTRIBUTION%20(REGULATION)%20ACT,2010.%20(42%20OF%202010).pdf)

**TABLE 5: Nature of Crisis Faced by the Organisations in the last 5 Years**

<b>Crisis</b>	<b>All Leaders (%)</b>
Financial Problems	64.1
Security Related Problems	29.1
Legal Problems	23.3

### **Crises as Learning**

Organisation D decided to support an upper-caste woman and her daughters in a child sexual abuse (CSA) case against the father. This case turned into a pitched battle between the powerful upper-caste lobby in the district and beyond and the organisation. The leadership had charges of abduction and kidnapping slapped against them; a public smear campaign was launched seeking to get rid of the organisation and save the district. Threat, attacks and abuse of staff created a situation of fear and panic within the organisation. Many workers did not really have either a clear perspective or an understanding of the law. But a 10-day dharna right in the heart of the town, by the organisation and its leadership established its determination to make CSA a public issue.

The ferocity of the opposition and the targeting of the organisation's leadership, which had to do with the caste status of the accused, took the leadership by surprise. The outrage of the opposition and its strength came from upper-caste networks from and beyond the district. The leadership had to draw on the weight of women's and child rights' groups working in the state and nationally to sustain their own battle and counter this pressure.

Towards the end of its second phase, the murder of a Dalit activist in a village resulted in the organisation taking the lead in getting the National Human Rights Commission to undertake an inquiry into the attack. With Dalit women in the village, the organisation was able to take on the fear and intimidation that legal action bought in its wake. In the narratives of these crises moments, the second-line-level leadership today recalled this phase as one in they acted as conduits between the between the leader of the organisation and the women in the community. These situations created possibilities of growth and confidence in the ability of an emerging second tier to lead, take responsibility and be part of the struggles and contestations.

### **Crises Fracturing the Public-Private Divide**

At times crises appeared within the organisation on the very issue that the leadership was focussing on in the community. Organisation F, which was committed to working publically on the issue of child marriage with the community and the law and order machinery, had to confront this issue within.

## **Sarita**

We had a Secretary, who had been with the organisation since 1998. She was a second-line leader and had worked for years on child marriage. In 2007, when her two daughters were getting married, the wedding card mentioned the names of the older two daughters. But two days earlier she had already got her youngest daughter, who was 11 years old married. We had all gone to attend the wedding. The next day we got to know about the third marriage. It was a real breach of trust, we were completely shattered: we called a meeting of the executive committee and she too came for the meeting. She said that she would accept whatever decision we took. We had to ask her to leave. We tried to keep the whole incident under wraps; it was bad for the organisation. People would mock us, saying one of your own people got their child married - what are you going to do about it? We did not think of taking any other action against her apart from asking her to leave. She was a good worker, her family was poor and she was the only bread winner. After this incident we make our workers sign an oath that if they do anything that is against the key values of the organisation, they will have to leave.

Through the narration of these crises, women leaders repeatedly said they could not understand why the person did not confide in them or seek their support. Possibly, their team members felt there was a limit to how empathetic the leader could be to their situation. For a leader in a crisis so close to the organisation, it is not just her morale, but also meant managing the morale of all the entire staff, who are also affected by such crises. This kind of crisis has been the toughest to handle and emerge from but it has resulted in the leadership building policies and forums for staff to come and share with each other and be supportive of each other.

## **Innovating in a Crisis Situation**

### **The Case of Organisation F**

'I felt the burden of leadership, all the responsibility was on me. We were back to the field once again.' The financial crisis experienced by this organisation pushed the leadership to fund ways to sustain their work. They parcelled out their work on VAW to their grassroots women's forum. The leader proposed continuing to work by getting a group of 30 women from their existing sangathan, 10 from each block (forming a Case Committee) to handle cases in the form of a Naari Adalat. The case committees ensured that the work related to handling cases, particularly involving caste-based panchayats and women's rights, continued but without needing constant monitoring by staff from the organisation. The women too were ready to take on this role and it was the leader who was able to recognise the potential of this strategy and make the shift. As one committee member stated, 'Ever since I joined (the Nari Adalat case committee) I feel strengthened, I can go out as I please, and this is a big thing in our community. I love case work as it has given me an identity, an authority. I go wherever there is a case or an issue to be solved.' The finances too were worked out. If someone approached the Women's Court, they had to pay a minimal fee covering the cost of travel of the women members and a limited charge for their wages. This strategy has given great energy to the 30 case committee members, who are now inundated with cases.

As mentioned in the earlier section, financial crises are amongst the most common with small or rural organisations, and that keep the leaders under considerable strain.

Obviously, not all financial crises have positive endings like the one above. The onus to keep the organisation ticking is the leader's and there are times when compromises are made to survive in tough situations. As mentioned above, leaders made the decision to shift from working with women to working with children, since funding was available for the latter. Though some viewed or articulated this as a slight shift in focus or attempted to rationalise this as an extension of their existing work, it was a push that emerged from a rapidly changing external reality.

This shift from women to also working children in the third phase (though some groups diversified in the second phase itself), was for many a disruption in terms of what the leaders were attempting to build at the grassroots level. The focus on Mahila Samitis, Women Federations and Mahila Sangathans required some activities to keep the forums active. 'We still have meetings in villages but the opportunity for them to step out, organise has reduced. We have been doing the ground work all this while, now was the time to move forward but the funds were over.'

## **Conclusion**

The majority of the women leaders run small NGOs with limited staff and many volunteers to support their interventions. These women-headed NGOs do not hold land, property or rather they do not fit the image of the NGO empires that come to mind when one thinks of established rural-based organisations. Financial crises is an ever present possibility, yet despite this leaders are interested in funders who work in a framework that supports, enables and strengthens organisations. Leaders recognise the changing scenario of output-oriented funding, however their own understanding of the reasons for this shift is limited. Within this scenario, the priority is to survive and continue work towards their goals of gender justice.

## CHAPTER 6: CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS

We need many more 'thick descriptions' of such situated experiences - and not only from major cities - in order to better understand the current trajectories of women and the women's movement.

Mary John 2009: 49

This study seeks to describe the locations and journeys of women leaders who head NGOs in the towns and cities that lie off the standard route of metros; it seeks to document and analyse their leadership practices. The trajectories of their lives and work have emerged in a particular moment in the women's movement – the Nineties, considered the watershed decade that witnessed the increasing institutionalisation of the IWM. The impact of neoliberal policies and globalisation plays an important role in this narrative, which constructs this decade as the start of the 'NGOisation' of women's groups, and the de-politicisation of feminist politics. The women leaders under scrutiny in this study are part of the ferment of the Nineties, which both our qualitative and quantitative data substantiates; in part, they represent the fruit of the IWM of the Seventies and Eighties and are also embedded in the more recent phenomenon of a burgeoning development sector in India.

In concluding our analyses of the women leaders' lives and work, we revisit the three areas of inquiry that we set out with. Who are these women, what socio-economic backgrounds do they come from and what have their journeys into leadership been? What is the nature of leadership that exists in the organisations that they have set up or head? Is it distinct in some way? Finally, we look at how the data and material emerging from this study responds to current ideas and debates related to feminist leadership.

### Locating the Leaders

The largest cross-section of women leaders, across first and second line, belong to the 31-40 age group, indicating an increasing space for younger women to play leadership roles within the organisations studied. The profile that emerges points to the persistence of caste and class privilege. The quantitative data indicates an overwhelming presence of women leaders from higher castes in first-line leadership (largely founders); with a small percentage belonging to SC (Dalit) and ST (Adivasi) communities. This bias extends to the decision-making forums within organisations: the composition of governing boards is marked by an absence of representatives from marginalised groups (see Chapter 2). The overall low representation of Dalits, Adivasis and Muslims in leading roles is significant, given that a majority of these groups work with marginalised communities and in areas where their share in the population is high. It speaks for the continued advantage and opportunities that exist for those who are privileged to move into leadership in this sector.

It mirrors also the situation that exists in big cities, where the IWM leadership has been and continues to be predominantly upper caste or then middle class.

However, it is in the second-line leadership that we see a distinct change. The second-line leadership records a far higher presence of Dalit and women from OBC communities. This represents conscious efforts by first-line leaders to provide opportunities to women belonging to communities they work with. Still, this mentorship is seriously circumscribed by the fact that low levels of education and social and cultural resources limit these women leaders' abilities to take on managerial and financial roles, that are concomitant with running an NGO. This disassociation between leadership with literacy and educational level is important aspect of the nature of women's leadership that needs attention in terms of leadership building initiatives.

### **Recovering the Past, Making Meaning of the Present**

Detailed life histories gathered through our interviews with women leaders nuanced the profiles that emerged from the quantitative data. While upper-caste women dominate the profile, their own experiences underline a more complicated picture of women negotiating difficult circumstances of extreme poverty, violence and insecurity, and repeatedly using tropes of struggle and survival as they remember these journeys.

Women leaders drew on events in their childhood as moments of resistance – taking a stand on domestic violence; continuing their education: these incipient acts of resistance, silences, and 'bad experiences' have been processed by them, and transformed into new perspectives through external support, opportunities and exposure provided in many cases by women's groups. Echoes of these life histories resound in the passion and commitment of most of these women leaders to take up cases and advocacy around gender-based violence later in their life and their work.

For several of the women leaders marriage was a critical turning point in their lives, and their testimonies pointed to the centrality of marriage as an institution where gender inequality is experienced in differing, but powerful ways. The process of questioning marriage is triggered for many of these women through their engagements with women's activists and organisations and subsequently becomes an important foundation for working on women's rights issues. This, in our view, partly explains the reason why for majority of leaders, the key conceptual category which informs their perspective and work is 'woman', it is the identity that they have experienced, which they recognise and it is the concept they use to mobilise others. Additionally, a pattern that was recurrent was that many leaders mould themselves on the lines of the women activists who supported and brought them into this work; the strategies they employ of support while working on violence mirror their own journeys to combat violence. The study shows that while opportunities and space



for reflection and perspective building have been critical in creating this cadre of women leaders, these have been steadily shrinking.

## The Practice of Leadership

### Leadership and Power

Feminist leadership is transformative, is inclusive, upholds the idea of the collective and is democratic in nature - these were some of the ideas that were explored through the study. Power is at the heart of feminist analysis of leadership and its exercise both within the public domain and internally within the organisation is critical. The narratives of leaders provided insights into the third domain that Batliwala refers to as the 'intimate' (2011: 34), where ideas of self are key. In the other two domains - within and outside their organisations - the women leaders we spoke with embodied a comfort with power within their organisations. There was no concept of hidden power: the leaders and those in second-line leadership accepted and validated the role of the leader in visioning and running the organisation. Leaders were able to identify the different elements that were their sources of power. The list broadly included understanding of issues and dynamics of the field, their strategies to deal with issues, the ability to build relationships across a spectrum of people, being responsible, decisive, being local and their personal charisma. A major site of power that emerged for the leadership is the field and their *pakad* - their command over it is at the heart of how they represent themselves to the world at large.

The Kafila model, with a leader who leads from the front, is the overarching image that emerges through the study. It is a form of leadership that is intimate, personal and committed to mentoring and building a team of second-line leaders. This commitment emerges not only from the fact that the leadership is engaged in empowering grass-roots women, but is also simultaneously building the confidence of local women - themselves from marginalised communities - to lead. Seema, a second-line leader describes her journey of leadership thus:

How have I have understood power? It doesn't come from anywhere. Information and *anubhav* (experience) is your power - not to keep to yourself, but to distribute that amongst others. It doesn't become more or less, this is what I have learnt. Earlier, when I did not have so much experience, I used to guard my information. Nowadays, if people come and ask me something, I tell them. If I distribute, then others say: she has *anubhav*, she is a good trainer, they call you for trainings, you learn new things, and *andar ki takat badti hai, ghatti nahi* (your inner strength increases, it doesn't decrease). I have had to take some *kathor* (harsh) decisions, which people have misunderstood. If you have *satta* (power) you have to take *nirnay* (decisions). And if it is in the *sanstha's* (organisation's) interest, then don't think of who is in front of you. But there is a process, steps you have to follow. In this model the leadership team is not the only one deciding.

However, one reason for the acceptance of the leadership and the lack of contestation that we see is the wide gap that exists between the women leaders and the second-line leadership. The majority of those at the second level of leadership come from marginalised communities and as a result have not had access to resources, in terms of educational training and skills that can provide the springboard to take on roles that interface with the world outside of the organisation and meet the demands of running an organisation. Thus, the future holds a serious challenge for the leadership: they will have to confront this gap when they wish to move out of their leadership role or take on different ones. The second-line leadership requires particular kinds of exposure and training for it to take greater roles in sustaining the organisation. The present leadership neither has the resources nor the time to address these concerns.

Within the organisations, the meaning of 'collective' translates to promoting 'team work'. Teams have been useful in creating a pool of skills across a number of people who can then share the work by supporting each other. The study found that leaders had not given much thought to setting up internal structures, and had largely responded to external demands. The introduction of multiple projects, expansion and entry into new terrains of work had led to changes in organisational cultures, which had been responded to but not creatively planned for. Leaders reported that they lacked skills in organisational development. There is a need for creative re-imagining of what was and how a 'collective' could work, for an organisation with changing needs, and financial and human investment in building organisations.

As women leaders who espouse principles of feminist politics, the leadership has had to confront issues of sexuality within the organisation and dealing with these has meant interrogating power relations. This is an area where the leadership has had to struggle between keeping the image of the organisation intact (as one that has 'good women') and coping with women (and at times men) exercising personal choices. Leaders have often been pushed to fire women or have been unable to gain support within to challenge given gender and sexuality norms. Opportunities for perspective building on sexuality and reflection forums to address these issues within institutional contexts have been limited for this group of women leaders.

### **Leadership and Identity**

The predominant conceptual framework with which the women leaders worked was of gender equality, 'woman' was their primary focus and category of analysis. The focus of work was on enabling access to rights and entitlements for women in the communities they work with. Over the past two decades issues of identity have been at the centre of debates within the women's movement and outside, resulting in the unpacking of the universal category – 'woman'. Research and activism has pointed out how gender relations are

mediated by other identities of caste, class, religion, sexuality among others. While, the organisations studied have had to address these issues, the study found that leaders chose to work with the category 'woman', while focussing on groups of women that belong to specific communities within. The study identified three reasons: First, in terms of perspective, many leaders were not familiar with more recent theoretical discussions on gender and identity nor had they had the opportunity to reflect on such issues. Second, their own lived experience as women, within families (many having discrimination and violence) and in the public domain had been critical in shaping their politics and personas. Their identity as women leaders had enabled them to enter the public domain. And thirdly, all the organisations studied were working in contexts where identity issues around caste and religion were especially fraught. Working with 'women' as an identity provided the leadership the means to intervene across different caste groups, and in few cases also across religions. To enter the private domain (of the family, and the public, community structures like caste panchayats), to challenge caste or religious leadership, and to engage with State institutions, positioning themselves as leaders speaking for women's interests and rights allowed them greater leverage.

The understanding of issues of caste and identity varied greatly amongst the leaders. The majority came from more powerful castes and communities. The few that belonged to marginalised groups had a more lived understanding of the politics of identity.

Despite working with the framework of gender equality the leaders' community identity, especially those of Muslim women leaders complicated their leadership practices and they faced tremendous challenges in terms of working across communities. Even within the organisations, there existed many assumptions regarding how well a Muslim woman leader can understand the concerns of Dalit or other poor women in rural areas. Very few women leaders who belong to the majority community themselves worked with the Muslim community in the field. There exists a powerful assumption that Muslim women can best lead women in their own communities. This barrier needs to be explored further.

### **Leadership, within and Outside**

Holding together the space within the organisation is not just about team building; for the leader, it is an extension of her politics. Leadership in these organisations was particularly mindful of building the culture of the organisation and spent considerable time and energy on this. Many of the organisations we profiled were located in areas where gender and caste norms are restrictive, and leaders had to confront them within and outside the organisation. Establishing non-discriminatory practices, dealing with the division of work among male and female staff, every-day fisticuffs with the politics of professionalism and educational privilege and hierarchies form part of the day-to-day grind that leadership engages with. Often, determining what will be the culture or organisational norm is a

unilateral decision; thereafter, consensus is built and ownership is forged. Formal organisational structures may be an area of weakness for most of the leadership, but their methods of building the stakes of their team in their vision and values are rich and layered. Much of this work is unaccounted for in any formal reporting that organisations undertake. For some organisations, the present study research tools provided the first opportunity to reflect on their work as an organisation as a whole rather than reflecting on a project.

Unique to this group of leaders was their continued work on violence against women. An important learning from the study has been that work on VAW builds the women leaders claims to leadership in powerful ways. It contributes to their unique persona as leaders, different from other NGOs or leaders, creates credibility amongst the women in the community and within the organisation and provides the leadership the opportunity to work across caste, religion and ethnic identities. Violence was the great equaliser, where gender politics is concerned. It was also the site where some of the most fraught and important contestations take place; on which the leaders have developed the skills to negotiate with and question the State and the community and this has added to their confidence and decision-making power. The leadership has also mentored her team to develop these skills and abilities consciously over time. As a result, leaders describe it as the issue that brings *jazba* to their work in the field. Despite the gains made, new laws and policies on VAW that have come into play, there is a relentlessness and a repetitiveness about this work. The quality and impact of their interventions on VAW need to be analysed in the light of the lack of funds and resources that they work with. The study showed that they are working on this issue with minimal funds. Most end up barely registering FIRs in police stations and very few have the resources to take legal work forward on a sustained basis.

Working with the State is a non-negotiable for women leaders. They have learnt over time to work with and against the State. They have sought collaborations with the State as a means to ensure that entitlements reach women in the community. They also see the value of having some men in the community buy in to their work and leadership. At the same time keeping connections within administrative machinery that is prone to transfers, requires patience and perseverance. Not to mention thinking on the spot about strategies to combat the sexual harassment (subtle and blatant) when a male-dominated local administrative machinery engages with women activists, seen to be too *azaad* (independent) and mobile.

Raising resources is a key role that the leadership plays. It is here that the woman leader's location as a leader from the small town works against her. Her strength also becomes her weakness: her command of the field attracts funders who are keen to ensure that their resources are well utilised by 'target populations', but most of these funders expect organisations to be mere implementers who unquestioningly work on targets and

outcomes determined by them. At points, leaders have had to modify their entire vision and processes of work to survive and keep their presence in the field going. Few funders work with a long-term vision of building capacities and strengths of such organisations or then have a forward-looking mandate in terms of what the potential of such organisations and leadership is. This is an area that requires urgent attention.

## **Of Politics and Labels**

Ideas of equality, dignity and rights in relation to women and the critique of patriarchy – these are the powerful magnet that attracts women from small towns and kasbahs to feminism. It connects with their experience, both individual and collective, in struggling against discrimination and as the study points out, it was the bedrock on which their claim to leadership was built. While some were ambiguous about identifying themselves with the term feminist, there was clarity in the group that their leadership was distinct from merely being women in leadership. Challenging patriarchy was at the core of what they sought to do, both within and outside the organisation. Highlighting the importance of approaching situations from the standpoint of women, the women leaders were clear that even if the woman were at fault, they would never publicly take up a campaign against a woman.

## **Relationship with the Women's Movement**

It was important to explore how the women leaders, many of whom had emerged (as described in Chapter 1) from developments and programmes engaged with by the Indian Women's Movement (IWM), looked at their relationship with this movement. Many were part of the IWM and other movements in their state, linking up with discussions on the PWDVA, struggles against liquor, anti-rape agitations, Forest Rights, The Right to Work Campaign, constitutional reservations for women etc. Many were also linked with other groups locally as part of networks or then in campaigns. Many of the women reiterated that the IWM has the energy and flexibility to bring local level issues to the national stage and vice versa. For the leaders, it was the strength of the local that kept the movement palpably alive for them in their context and location.

While the groups that formed part of our research sample had significant links with the IWM, the leadership was also critical of the nature of their engagement with what they viewed as the 'urban arm of the movement'. The English language represented more than just a language divide but an exclusion from certain kinds of discourses and ideas. The majority of the leaders marked this as a major reason for their sense of exclusion and the invisibilisation of their leadership in feminist engagements with conceptual ideas (as compared to work on the ground). Although never seen as such, in the eyes of the IWM or the State, through the study we saw these leaders as very much located on the front line of the work on women's rights and development; at the point where the State, the women's

movement and the community meet. They felt excluded from larger processes of policy formulation: all new policies, laws and programmes (on development, women's rights and so on) are advocated for by resource and advocacy groups working at the national and state level. Yet finally it was organisations like theirs that worked on the ground to make these a tangible part of people's lives. These organisations, and women, were the ones that left dealing with the everyday contestations, monitoring and implementation of the State's programmes and mandates with local bureaucracies and the community. It is this crucial role and these complex experiences that the study hopes to add to the existing literature on leadership in the women's movement in India.

We were careful to analyse our data in the light of the critiques of NGOisation and depoliticisation of women's rights work. There is no denying that for these leaders, the world of funding, generating and implementing projects is part of their identity and a means to continue their work. They are most often not in a position to critique funder policies and mandates. Many shared their own vulnerability to shifting priorities of funders and State initiatives and also to have to compromise on their own priorities to pursue projects to survive in the area. As many researchers admit, there is a diversity of NGOs that exist and operate in the domain of development. Women-headed NGOs are a small percentage in this large community and those outside of the main metropolises neither have the capital - knowledge or financial - to set the terms of the debate. They lie in the shadowy areas between the politics and ideals set out by the women's movement and those of development agencies and reflect the limits and strengths of both. There is diversity even within these groups from the more subversive to the more bureaucratic and within this continuum they are likely to change over time. The critical question is - what resources are made available to them? How much does the women's movement build their abilities to contest and create new arenas of action? Can development projects build their abilities to create institutions that strengthen local women?

If we come full circle, back to the flight of the cranes that we started out with, we could question whether the cranes do indeed represent our ideas of feminist leadership. Perhaps the women leaders leave us with a different image: Escher's fish transforming into birds in flight. It depends on where you train your eyes. There are spaces of transformative politics and there is the mechanical reality of implementing and monitoring inputs and outputs. Both exist; overlapping in places and retaining their pure form and shape at the extremities. Between purism of the two lies the dynamic, messy and always-changing space in which these extraordinary women leaders live and work.

## **Recommendations**

### **Investing in building capacities of women-led organisations**

The study has clearly shown that there is both a paucity of capacity-building interventions in general and that the nature of interventions provided are largely adhoc, one-time and often 'technical' – focussed on specific issues or geared to assisting in better project implementation. The study also shows very clearly that there is an entire universe of organisations where the second-line leaders are emerging from socially and economically disadvantaged communities, often without formal educational skills. They are committed to working on issues of women's rights at the grassroots. We found that many women leaders had not even had the opportunity of undergoing rigorous gender trainings. And thirdly, such organisations as covered by this study face complex challenges as they move from being small, working on single issues with simple organisational structures to having to deal with expansion and managing multiple projects. Almost all the organisations studied have had no inputs in terms of organisational development and some of the experiences have not been very useful as the organisational development 'expert' usually comes with more corporate experience, or dealing larger organisations. We thus recommend:

- Investments in building second-line women leaders working in smaller urban centres through sustained leadership development.
- Supporting intensive and rigorous gender trainings for staff of women-led organisations.
- Investment in the conceptualisation of organisational development programmes for women-led organisations that address needs of particular organisations and across organisations.
- Development of peer learning exchanges between organisations, facilitated by individuals and organisations who have knowledge and expertise of working on women's rights issues and organisational development.

### **Creation of spaces for learning and reflection**

While this was a research study, many of the participating organisations felt that the methodology used had in fact enabled them to think and reflect on issues they previously hadn't had the space to do. There are no reflective spaces that go beyond issue-based inputs or project-related inputs. One of the areas that many organisations felt they had not discussed enough was identity and its linkages with gender issues. Secondly, many organisations felt while projects may be within their mandate, they are often developed elsewhere and they are called in as 'implementing partners'.

- Leadership and learning institutes that focuses on women leaders working outside of big metros, that combine theoretical inputs alongside reflections on their application in the field.
- Building of collaborative projects built on mutual interests, where the projects not only deliver on targets but are reflective learning spaces.
- Creation of programmes or academies that build feminist theoretical knowledge that incorporate perspective building on different identity issues like caste, religion, ethnicity, sexuality, disability etc.

## **Resources**

One of the findings of the study has been that the organisations studied are under-resourced and a large part of the time of first-line leaders is spent on raising resources. Secondly, the work of women-led organisations working outside the large metros is not well known. Thirdly, all the organisations were working on VAW but this was often poorly or non-funded. We therefore recommend that:

- Funding agencies build programmes that specifically support not just women's programmes but organisations led by women.
- Exchanges between women-led organisations and funders be organised to showcase the work being done.
- Fellowships combined with mentorship as a means of investing both financial and human resources should be supported.
- Concrete support is given for work being done on violence against women combined with a capacity building component.



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## **ANNEXURE 1: PROFILES OF PARTICIPATING ORGANISATIONS (QUALITATIVE STUDY)**

### **ARPAN, District Pithoragarh, Uttarakhand**

**Starting out:** Arpan was started in 1997 by Renu Thakur, its founder, who abandoned her studies in Delhi and moved back to her home state of Uttarakhand to work. She worked with three organisations in various capacities, learning the ropes about what to do and not and honing her skills but her heart always told her that she would return to her roots someday. Today Arpan has a team of 15 of which ten are women.

**Vision:** Arpan works to organise people into groups and collectives to fight for their rights. They work with a focus on the rights of women and of Ban Raji and Bhotia tribals.

**Context:** Askot Block is remote and borders Tibet in the north and Nepal in the east. The journey from the closest railhead to the Block headquarters takes 12 hours. As in most hilly areas the local populations' dependence on natural resources, especially forest resources, to eke out is living is high. Over the years, agriculture has become unviable - land holdings have become small and fragmented and irrigation facilities are poor. The younger generation does not want to work on the land and youth migration is high. Facilities such as health care, education, etc. are of poor quality. The levels of education however have increasing steadily, especially amongst those with resources. The area has a significant tribal population, which includes the 'primitive tribe' of the Ban Rajis whose population has dwindled to a total of 165 families across nine villages, and a more powerful Bhotia community. Bhotias have access to land, education and are well represented in government jobs and the administration.

**Interventions by Arpan:** Arpan began its work in the area rather dramatically by taking on a number of difficult and controversial cases. They assisted a Mahila Mandal in their efforts at taking on the local mafia involved with illegal stone mining. This was followed by a study on the delimitation of forest land, re-opening of an old rape case and a successful anti alcohol movement. This established Arpan's image in the area as a strong women's organisation. Arpan then moved on to taking on a number of development projects while simultaneously facilitating the formation of village groups and Community Based Organisations (CBOs). Arpan has been instrumental in the setting up of the Bhumi Adhikar Manch (comprising women and men members fighting for the land rights and forest rights of the Raji tribals), the Mahila Adhikar Sangathan (collective of Bhotia and Raji women); the Virangana Mahila Panch Pradhan Sangathan (a network of elected women representatives) and establishing a Cooperative of Bhotia women weavers. At present Arpan is working in 88 villages covering 56 Gram Sabhas and has an active team of local women.

### **MAHILA JAN KALYAN SANSTHAN, District Rudrapur, Uttarakhand**

**Starting out:** Heera Jangapani started exploring the idea of working in the tribal hamlets inhabited by the Buksa and Tharu community in the Terai area of Rudrapur District from 2003, and finally set up Mahila Kalyan Sansthan in 2004. Heera, herself a Bhotia, had previously worked for several years (from 1998 to 2001) with another NGO, where she gained in-depth experience of doing fieldwork, especially mobilising women.

**Vision:** MKS is an organisation that promotes democracy through encouraging peoples participation. It fights for the rights of tribals and women and wants to bring a change in their lives.

**Context:** The two blocks where MKS started work- Gadarpur and Khatima- have a significant tribal population, close to 25%. Over the past four decades, there has been an influx of Sikhs from Punjab who have migrated here to take up farming in this fertile region. More recently, Rudrapur has been developed as an industrial belt, with factories being built promoted by the state government. This has resulted in many tribals being dispossessed of their land. Sikh tenants have taken control of land and in collusion with the land mafia and local bureaucracy transferred land in their name. The government too has acquired land for dam construction, without adequately compensating tribals. The Forest Department too has restricted the rights of tribals over their common property resources such as forests. Among the tribal groups Buksas and Tharus are economically and socially disadvantaged and discriminated against. Bukas and Tharu women too are now compelled to labour on the land of big farmers.

**Interventions by MKS:** Starting out by working in five villages, with a small team of three persons, MKS initiated SHGs to mobilise women. While organising women, cases of violence were reported to the team and taken up. A fledgling organisation, MKS challenged both decisions made by Jati Panchayats prevalent in the region and the police in handling these cases. This won them the trust of the women and some members of the community. Cases have since then been taken up by MKS, even though there is no funding for this work. By 2008 MKS set up Sabla Sangh, a forum for tribal women across the 40 villages that their work had expanded to. The Sabla Sangh develops women's leadership, encouraging them to take on local issues, related to women, governance, access to entitlements and tribal rights. They also started working on another contentious issue – land rights. As a consequence Bhumi Adhikar Manch, a community-based organisation, with a mandate to work on land and forest rights of tribals was established. At present MKS works in 70 villages, has 100 SHG groups and 14 Reflect Circles, a Sabla Sangh with a 25-member core team, a Bhumi Adhikar Manch covering 30 villages. The organisation has some 25 workers.

#### **VIMARSH: Nainital, Uttarakhand**

**Starting out:** Kanchan Bhandari started Vimarsh in 2001 with nine years of prior experience of working with a well-known NGO Chirag. She set up Vimarsh to work in a focused manner with women from the hills of Nainital District. She began work in a few blocks of Nainital where few NGOs work, with a small team of three persons and survived on just one fellowship.

**Vision:** Vimarsh views work with women as well as with youth as critical to build a gender-just society, and that it is important to organise and mobilise women, to take forward local struggles.

**Context:** Tourism has boosted the economy of the region but has resulted in large-scale environmental degradation. Locally organised people's movements sporadically come up and act as pressure groups against these negative effects, often with success. The traditional occupation is dairy and vegetable farming, with all the hard manual labour being done by the women, while men do the marketing. Despite this, women have no control over the income generated.

Bhimtal and Betaalghat, where Vimarsh works have pockets where no government services reach: access to public services for women were practically non-existent. Incidence of girls dropping out of school, domestic violence was high and marriage was used as a pretext to traffic girls in some interior Blocks.

**Interventions by Vimarsh:** Vimarsh started work in 5 panchayats (20 villages) in Bhimtal and Betaalghat blocks in 1999 and now work in Bhowali, Haldwani, Bhimtal and Nanital Districts covering 30 Panchayats intensively as well as the cities of Nainital and Haldwani. Vimarsh's approach brings together delivery oriented and rights based work. Vimarsh has worked on income generation projects with women, ranging from computer training, goat rearing, and poultry farming to setting up biogas stoves and water tanks in 95 households in 2008. At the same time it has actively set up Mahila Sangathans to take on issues of violence, participation in panchayats, and in questioning their access to MGNREGA. Vimarsh has, over the years, organised state-level Public Hearings and undertaken advocacy work with the State. Vimarsh also works with youth proactively as part of its strategy to promote gender equality. They set up Kishori Sangathans as early as 1999 and they have more recently been part of a Child Protection Network. Currently, the 38 issue-based women's groups (Shakti Sangathan) supported by Vimarsh meet regularly and proactively take up issues. Vimarsh has a 13 member staff.

#### **VANANGANA: Banda and Chitrakoot, Uttar Pradesh**

**Present leadership:** Founded in 1993, Vanangana decided to follow the model of collective leadership drawn from its local staff when its founder, Madhavi Kuckreja, decided to move out from the district over a decade ago. The study examines the present leadership practices of the organisation. Varied in age, personality and time in leadership, Pushpa, Shabina and Avdesh work together to steer the organisation with which their lives have been inextricably linked since they began working in it.

**Vision:** Vanangana is a feminist organisation working with women from Dalit, Kol and Muslim communities, organising them around issues of gender-based, caste-based and community-based discrimination from a human rights perspective.

**Context:** The dominant feature of this eastern part of the Bundelkhand region is its still feudal structure. Dominant caste groups control land and other resources, and the region is notorious for gangs that operate by appropriating funds through violence and intimidation. In the past few years, State and Central governments have poured in funds for development. Such monies have largely accrued to the property-owning establishment and others who are close to government officials, while leaving most community members in abject poverty facing daily discrimination. Agriculture is rain-fed and land holdings small and fragmented. Violence against women takes many forms, which have become normalised throughout the Bundelkhand region. Neither those married women facing domestic violence in the small towns, nor those in the predominantly rural settings have access to familial support networks in their natal homes once they are married. Apart from domestic violence, incidents of murder (mostly for dowry) and rape are endemic in the Bundelkhand region: a part of the culture of violence prevalent in the region

**Interventions by Vanangana:** Vanangana was established with a mandate to provide technical training and on-going support to village-level women sangathan members collectivised by the Mahila Samakhya programme. Beginning with equipping non-literate Dalit and tribal women to work as hand pump mechanics, Vanangana continued to work on issues of water and natural resource management from a feminist perspective. Its present work in this area includes increasing Dalit and single women's access to MGNREGA by creating women-only worksites and the training women with minimal literacy skills as mates.

Another important area of Vanangana's work centers on combatting VAW. Vanangana provides legal support and shelter to the survivor and her children on a short or long-term basis, as needed. They deal with over a 100 cases annually.

Vanangana has organised a 3,000 woman strong Dalit Mahila Samiti (DMS; registered as a separate entity in 2011) working on issues of confronting untouchability and other caste based discriminatory practices, domestic violence and accessing government programmes and schemes. Adult literacy classes for these women are held for DMS members. In Banda Vanangana works with adolescent girls from the Muslim community by providing trainings on computer literacy, videography, photography etc., using this training as a stepping stone to building a rights based perspective.

#### **SAVATRI BAI PHULE DALIT MAHILA SANGHARSH MORCHA: Jaunpur, Uttar Pradesh**

**Starting out:** Usha was part of a group of three that ventured out in 1998 on cycles to spread the message of Baba Saheb Ambedkar amongst Dalits. While Usha dreamt of women leading, the men in her organisation she saw Usha merely in the role of a good mobiliser of women, a perception she has slowly changed. Over a decade, Usha has emerged as the leader of the Savitri Bai Phule Dalit Mahila Sangharsh Morcha, not just in Jaunpur but also at the State level.

**Vision:** *'Jo bhookha hai woh hi ladai lad sakti hai'* (Those who are hungry are the ones who can struggle) is the basis of mobilising women and men from the Dalit community. SBPDMSM has been influenced by ideals of Baba Saheb Ambedkar.

**Context:** When the organisation started, the ability of Dalits to access the law and order machinery was limited and heavily loaded against them; Dalits had limited information regarding their rights and entitlements. Many were indebted to moneylenders or then at the mercy of landlords who made them work overtime with low wages. Many men had migrated due to lack of employment facilities to cities to work, leaving women to manage and run the home.

**Interventions by SBPDMSM:** Work started with holding meetings in Dalit bastis, sharing Ambedkar's ideas on equality and rights vis-à-vis Dalits. A wide range of issues was raised - for instance, the rape of a Dalit woman by an upper-class man, police atrocities at the behest of the powerful and demand for full wages. While there was limited knowledge about the law, action on these issues was informed more by a passionate commitment to equality. As members observed about their work in the first couple of years, "We were flashing a revolver that was without bullets." During this period the identity under which the group worked was Rashtriya Samajik Vikas Samiti



(RSVS). In 2002 a strong link developed between RSVS and Dalit Action Group (DAG), a UP-state level platform that worked on Dalit issues and which trained the team to undertake work on auditing the MGNREGA programme. The violence against women work too led to people from other caste groups approaching them for support. In 2006 the renewal of the formal registration of RSVS was not done, instead in 2007 two organisations were registered. The Savitri Bai Phule Dalit Mahila Sangharsh Morcha and the Gramin Evam Khetihar Mazdoor Union. The first brought the women together, while men led the second organisation. SBPDMSM expanded with the support of DAG to 5 districts with 2 full-time, 8 part-time and 6000 volunteers covering 140 villages in 2013.

Interventions of the women's organisation strengthening Dalit women's participation in schemes for employment, spreading awareness on government schemes such as Janini Suraksha, developing Dalit women's leadership to raise issues under SC/ST Act violations and those related to violence against women.

### **ASTITVA: Muzaffarnagar, Uttar Pradesh**

**Starting out:** Rehana began working with the Mahila Samakhya programme in Uttar Pradesh and then worked with DISHA, an organisation in Saharanpur. After several years of working she found that despite all the government programs and NGOs work in the area, there were hardly any Muslim women in meetings. This spurred her decision to begin her own organisation in the neighbouring Muzaffarnagar district in April 2005. Despite several years of work behind her and a familiarity with the area, she was confronted with fresh challenges, largely to do with her identity.

**Vision:** Astitva works for the rights of Dalit and Muslim women and children by organising them into pressure groups to demand their rights and protest injustice from the family, community and State.

**Context:** Muzaffarnagar District in western UP is economically well-off due to agriculture and other businesses. The area is dominated by the economically and politically powerful Jat community. Most Pradhans at the village level are from this community. The status of women in this community however is very poor. The other prominent community in Muzaffarnagar are Muslims, of different castes. Some Muslims are also economically well-off and politically well-connected. Muslim women, like Jat women have little access to information, education or any form of redress against violations against their rights. Besides these two major communities Dalits, OBCs and Sikhs are also present.

When Astitva began its work in 2007, the state had a Dalit Chief Minister. Inspired by Ambedkar's call to action – educate, struggle and unite – Dalit women were becoming more aware, and the community was changing. In the beginning, no Muslim women would participate in any of the andolans. So the organisation used religion to begin discussions and then also to talk politics – about the Gujarat carnage in 2002 – and to encourage women to go to open bank accounts or visit the PHC.

**Interventions by Astitva:** Rehana's work began with her activism in the area by taking up the case of a Muslim woman raped by her father-in-law – known nationally as the 'Imrana case'. Her involvement in the case established her and later her organisation in the area. Realising VAW was

not an easy issue to mobilise women, Astitva also began to work on access to government schemes, 'ration poshan ke muddey' (issues of food security) and on livelihoods (through MGNREGA) to reach out to women. Their work was movement based. At present Astitva is working with on education with children (including child labourers, rag pickers and destitute children), organises adolescent girls groups and works on health issues with women on issues of immunisation, nutrition etc. At present the organisation is working in 42 villages with dalit and Muslim women.

### **RAJSAMAND JAN VIKAS SANSTHA: District Rajsamand, Rajasthan**

**Starting out:** Shakuntala Pamecha has travelled a long way from being the wife of a general manager in JK Tyres in Rajsamand, to working full-time with rural women. She started work with Aastha in the mid-Nineties, as part of the government-run Women's Development Programme. She began organising tribal women to establish their own forum, which could act as a pressure group in their struggle to access their rights to resources and justice.

**Vision:** *Haq, adhikar aur mauka* - Women have the right to freedom, the right to opportunities and the right to make their own decisions:

**Context:** Rajsamand has a significant population of Rajputs and tribals (Bhils). The tribals are impoverished due to poor access to government development schemes, to education, health and technical training. Poverty is a reality for many Rajputs, yet honour and claims to high school status impact their opportunities to access development programmes. Both tribal and Rajput women experience the hold of their communities through the powerful institution of jati panchayats, and practices like 'naata'. Over the past two decades Rajsamand has also been home to strong people based movements, with a national presence, like the Right to Information, Right to Work and Food Security.

**Interventions by RJVS:** In 1998 Rajsamand Mahila Manch, formed under the guidance of Aastha, had a membership of 1500 members across two blocks (Rajsamand and Relmagra) and took up issues of issues of child marriage, violence against women, and access to water with the local bureaucracy and intervened in women's cases with the Jati Panchayats. Women from the Rajput community, tribal women, those from Other Backward Castes were part of this forum. In 2004 RJVS was registered and the Mahila Manch expanded the nature of its work phenomenally, in health, the Right to Work and Right to Information. RJVS trained women to become Mates or work site supervisors under MGNREGA and worked with the Mahila Sarpanches. RJVS's work on violence involved working on the DV act, interfacing with the legal system on women's cases, establishing Nari Adalats (women's courts) as informal mediation centres and intervening in Jati Panchayat processes. RJVS also viewed child marriage as a major reason for the high prevalence of violence against women and undertook major campaigns between 2005 and 2008 to educate and advocate with different stakeholders like the police, the protests, Jati Panches etc. In the last two years due to a lack of financial resources, RJVS has sustained its work on VAW with community leaders taking on the work of running the Nari Adalats, raising funds from the community itself to cover the expenses incurred by the women.

## **VIKALP: Jodhpur, Rajasthan**

**Starting out:** Drawn to working with young people during her six-year stint with Astha in Udaipur, Usha was encouraged by friends and well wishers to start work directly and independently with the youth. She set up Vikalp in 2004 along with Yogesh, her colleague at Astha and another friend. They began working with young girls in Barmer District in Western Rajasthan. The groups work on child marriage is inspired by her own life struggles – ‘I stopped my own child marriage; I feel I was one of the lucky few who got a second chance to lead life on my own terms.’

**Vision:** Vikalp sees itself as an organisation that helps women and girls speak out for their rights and those of others, and believes that once equality between the sexes has been achieved issues such as child marriage and domestic violence shall cease to exist.

**Context:** Barmer, where Vikalp started work, lies at the Western tip of the state of Rajasthan and shares a long border with Pakistan. Drought and livelihood have been the most prominent issues, till recently in 2005 when oil was discovered in the district which has changed the situation with regard to livelihoods and jobs for some in the the region. While there are organisations working on women and livelihoods there has been silence around the issue of violence against women.

Rajasthan is a state with low education indicators, very low status of women and high incidence of child marriage. Western Rajasthan in particular continues propagating its feudal caste and gender traditions; in Barmer, women have to take off their footwear in front of upper castes, and face the wall if they are approaching. ‘Upper caste’ women are totally repressed in terms of mobility and freedom.

**Interventions by Vikalp:** Vikalp’s work has been campaign based, with a stress on building a strong cadre of volunteers. Issues identified by the youth became the basis for the launch of state-wide campaigns. One such campaign rights of girls (‘Aapni dikri aapno haque’) was launched to tackle issues of female foeticide, female infanticide, illiteracy, gender based violence and child marriage. This campaign was up-scaled to twelve Districts in the State in 2006 when Vikalp became a part of Oxfam-led ‘We Can Campaign’. During the height of the Campaign, Vikalp was successful in mobilising over 400 youth as volunteers and had two lakh registered changemakers.

This Campaign served to establish the organisation as a major force working on the issue of violence against women in the State within the context of various new and changing legislations - the Domestic Violence Act, Prevention of Child Marriage Act in 2005, the Pre-Conception and Pre-Natal Diagnostic Techniques Act (2003). At present the organisation works in five districts (Jodhpur, Nagaur, Udaipur, Jalore and Pali) on issues of child marriage (across four Districts), girls’ rights (Muskati Betiyan Abhiyan in one district) and with elected women representatives (in one district). Case work was and continues to be a mainstay of their work.

## ANNEXURE 2: LIST OF PARTICIPATING ORGANISATIONS (QUANTITATIVE STUDY)

Organisation Name	Districts
<b>RAJASTHAN</b>	
Jan Chetna Sansthan	Sirohi
Garib Nawaj Mahila Avam Bal Kalyan Samiti	Ajmer
Sasvika Samudayik Swasthya Avam Vikas Karyakram	Ajmer
Disha Shekhawati Mahila Avam Balika Vikas Sansthan	Churu
Shubham Mahila Prashikshan Sansthan Alwar	Alwar
National Muslim Women Welfare Society	Jaipur
Sakhi Samiti	Alwar
Saransh Sansthan	Ajmer
Jagrati Vikas Sanstha Barana	Ajmer
Mahila Uthan Avam Vikas Sansthan	Ajmer
Bagad Vasudha Kalyan Sansthan	Banswara
Nari Utthan Seva Samiti	Udaipur
Ekal Nari Shakti Sangathan	Udaipur
Rajasmand Jan Vikas Sanstha	Rajasmand
Bal Avam Mahila Chetna Samiti	Bhilwada
Mahila Jan Adhikar Samiti	Ajmer
Peedo	Dungarpur
Society for Integrated Development Activities Research & Training	Jaipur
Vikalp	Jodhpur
Mahila Mandal Badmer Aagore	Barmer
Social Action and Mobilisation Participatory Rural Community	Nagaur
Society to Uplift Rural Economy (SURE) Badmer	Barmer
Indira Priyadarshini Sansthan	Jodhpur
<b>UTTAR PRADESH</b>	
Aanchal gramin vikas samajik sansthan	Saharanpur
Parvaj Samajik Sansthan	Saharanpur
Jagruk mahila sansthan	Saharanpur
Mahila Swarozgar samiti	Varanasi
Uttar Pradesh Positive Women Society	Varanasi
Vision Society for Interactive Operational	Varanasi
Aman Samajik Sangathan	Saharanpur
Prayatan Foundation	Lucknow
Prayatan	Azamgarh
Gramya Sansthan	Varanasi
Shikhar Prashikshan Sansthan	Mirzapur
Sangtin Kisan Mazdoor Sangathan	Sitapur
Sabla	Rae Bareilly
Astitva	Muzzafarnagar

Saakar	Bareilly
Vanangna	Chitrakut
Sehjani Shiksha Kendra	Lalitpur
Gram Vikas Seva Sansthan	Amethi
Navbharat Samajik Ekta	Moradabad
Sankalp	Meerut
Tarun Vikas Sansthan	Banda
Ibteda Seva Sansthan	Chitrakut
Pragati Madhyam Samiti	Chitrakut
Madhuvan Seva Samiti	Fatehpur
Samudayik Kalyan Avam Vikas Sanstha	Kushi Nagar, Gorakhpur
Savitri Bai Phule Dalit Mahila Sangarsh Morcha	Jaunpur
<b>UTTARAKHAND</b>	
Naini mahila Avas Bal Vikas Samiti	Nainital
Vimarsh	Nainital
Parivartan	Haldwani
Saral Sansthan Self Awareness & Learning Trust	Haldwani
Prayas	Nainital
Adarsh Seva Sansthan	Rudrprayag
Cheshta Vikas Kalyan Samiti	Nainital
Common Seva Samiti	Sitarganj, uddham singh nagar
Jan Jagrat Seva Samiti	Sitarganj, uddham singh nagar
Mahila Utthan Sanstha	Haridwar
Mahila Seva Samiti	Tehri Garwal
Gram Mahila Kalyan Sansthan	Dehradun
Gramin Bal Avam Mahila Utthan Sansthan	Dehradun
Kusum Mahila Gramudyog Vikas Samiti	Rudrprayag
Sumati Foundation	Kotdwar
Society for Environment and Development	Dehradun
Himalaya Rachnatmak Jan Kalyan Samiti	Chamoli
Bindu	Dehradun
Astitva	Dehradun
Ankita Samajik Sanstha	Tehri Garwal
Samadhan	Dehradun
Arpan	Pithoragarh
Mahila Kalyan Samiti	Uddham singh nagar

## ANNEXURE 3: LIST OF PARTICIPANTS AT NATIONAL CONSULTATION TO DISCUSS DRAFT REPORT

New Delhi, November 14, 2014

Name	Name of Organisation	Email id
P.S. Kapur	American Jewish Women's Service	<a href="mailto:pkapur@ajws.org">pkapur@ajws.org</a>
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Yogesh	Vikalp	<a href="mailto:vikalporg@gmail.com">vikalporg@gmail.com</a>
Usha	Vikalp	<a href="mailto:vikalporg@gmail.com">vikalporg@gmail.com</a>
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Kalyani	Gender @ Work	<a href="mailto:kmenonsen@gmail.com">kmenonsen@gmail.com</a>
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Renuka	Sadbhavana Trust	
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## **ANNEXURE 4: PARTNER ORGANISATIONS AND RESEARCHERS**

This project was undertaken by Gender at Work with funding support from FLOW in collaboration with Sadbhavana Trust. The quantitative study was undertaken by Collaborative Research and Dissemination (CORD).

### **About Gender at Work**

Founded in 2001, Gender at Work is an international collaborative that helps organisations build cultures of equality and social justice, with a focus on gender equality. Gender at Work brings together new knowledge with expertise in capacity development and strategic learning and evaluation and works through a network of gender experts from across the world. (<http://www.genderatwork.org/>)

### **About Sadbhavana Trust**

Sadbhavana Trust was registered in 1990 by a group of social activists who worked with the labouring rural poor in Delhi. Since then it has worked in partnership with several NGOs on a range of community-based and research projects and has supported the establishment of other organisations. Sadbhavana Trust has worked on relief and rehabilitation, in Gujarat and Kashmir. Sadbhavana Trust also supports the work of Sanatkada Samajik Pahal that works on the empowerment of young Muslim women through training and community initiatives in Lucknow.

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### **About CORD**

Collaborative Research and Dissemination (CORD) is an independent research group that seeks to articulate the problems of the disadvantaged through field-based research. CORD endeavours to influence policy and public opinion by making its research findings accessible to the public. CORD believes in multidisciplinary and collaborative research and has collaborated with a number of national and international organisations and institutes of repute, both government and non-government. (<http://cordindia.com/>)

## **RESEARCH TEAMS**

**Anchors:** Dipta Bhog & Malini Ghose; **Researchers :** Malini Ghose, Dipta Bhog, Madhavi Kuckreja, Praneeta Kapur; **Documentation:** Sana Javeid

**CORD Team:** Anuradha De, Fathayya Khan, and Chander Shekhar Mehra assisted by Harsimrat Kaur and Aashti Salman

**Survey Team:** Hameeda Khatoon, Ayesha Khatoon, Maheshwari, Nasreen Riyaz, Nazma Iqbal, Anita Sharma, Sapna Bhatnagar, Pramila Shrivastava, Padma Joshi and Anu Kumari.