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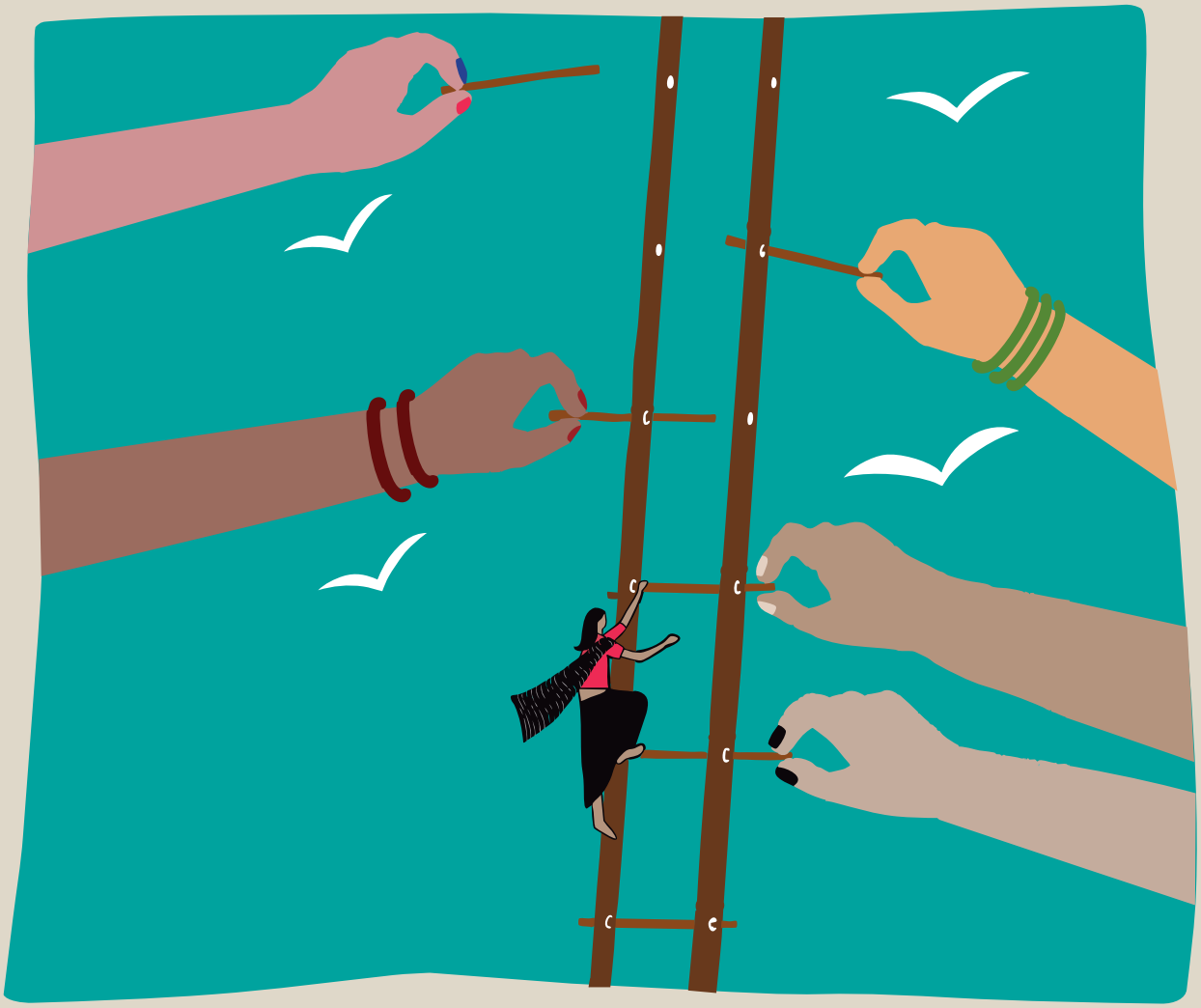
CHINGAARI

"A Resource for Building Feminist Leadership with Frontline Women Workers"



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January 2025

About ICRW

The International Center for Research on Women (ICRW) decentralized global network comprises three autonomous regional entities—ICRW Africa, ICRW Americas, and ICRW Asia. For nearly 50 years, ICRW has set the global agenda for gender equity, inclusion, and shared prosperity with action-oriented research and solutions. Our global experts generate groundbreaking insights and develop gender transformative strategies on topics like economic opportunity and security, health and reproductive rights, gender norms, and climate action. Our vision is to create an equitable, sustainable, and prosperous world where women, girls, and structurally excluded populations lead and thrive.

About WGH India

The WGH India chapter is part of the global Women in Global Health (WGH) movement, which seeks to advance gender equity in health leadership in India. WGH India seeks to amplify the experiences and knowledge of women working in the health sector, particularly frontline workers, and marginalized vulnerable groups, through dialogues, research, and advocacy efforts and to create a movement to demand the advancement of women's leadership in the health sector in India. Currently, WGH India comprises more than 245 members, which include nurses, midwives, doctors, public health professionals, health policymakers, researchers, and private-sector health workers.

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CHINGAARI

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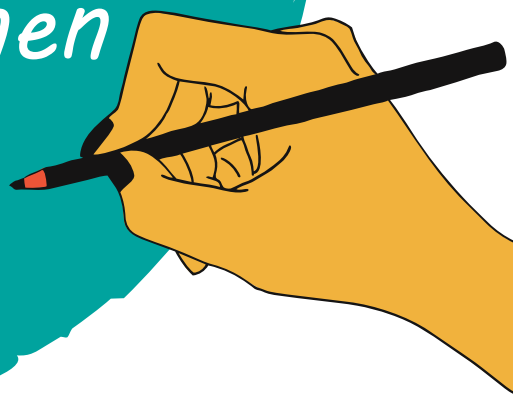
A Resource for Building Feminist Leadership with Frontline Women Workers



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Finally, we extend our deep gratitude to the global team of Women in Global Health (WGH) for their trust in and support of this work, and to the India chapter of WGH for anchoring this programme with care.

Contents

To the fires we all carry within us.

To those who came before us.
To those who walk alongside us.
And to those who will come after us.

To all who choose to embrace
their own fire.

In Amrita
Pritam's words,

"Meri aag mujhe mubarak"

- blessed be
my fire to me.

Introduction

What lies at the heart of feminist leadership?

Every programme begins with a question. Chingaari (Spark), the gender transformative leadership programme by International Centre for Research on Women (ICRW), Asia and Women in Global Health (WGH), India, also began with one question: what lies at the heart of a feminist leadership programme?

This question has mattered to us because at Chingaari, our purpose always returned to one clear intention, commitment (and longing): to nurture and advance the leadership of grassroots women health workers, the ones who carry the weight of community health work on their backs. And so the question endured, the one we kept asking of ourselves, of each other, of co-travellers, colleagues, experts, and of life and the world.

As we moved forward in the journey with our Chingaari Fellows, the question evolved and multiplied. What does it mean to bring women workers with diverse realities of caste, religion, gender who hold communities together, into a leadership building programme ? What and how, could a capacity building programme on feminist leadership meaningfully contribute to their lives at work? Why should we invite them to think about and practice feminist leadership at all? Should that even be a priority?

These were not abstract questions.

They came from conversations with women, who balanced care responsibilities at home with unpredictable demands at work, who stayed invisible in organisational hierarchies despite being central to community health. They spoke of workplaces with visible and invisible barriers that affected their salary, health, life choices and self-worth. They mentioned norms of gender and sexuality that tied honour to their bodies, restricted their mobility, and hence the opportunities they could access. They spoke of sexual harassment, caste based and religious discriminations that circumscribed their lives and showed up in more ways than we can count. Sometimes they spoke softly. At times, with anger, rage, fierceness, but also helplessness, despondency and tears. But with each passing conversation, their sharing only confirmed what evidence had already established that something was amiss, not in them, but in the structures around them and in the way we approached them.

Chingaari made us recognize that leadership programmes for grassroots women need to be different. They need to be intentional in integrating tangible rights and protection required by these women, to exercise agency into the imagination of leadership. They need to make room for anger, exhaustion, confusion, and sometimes, also the unwillingness to learn, to respond or to be present.

They need to recognise the slow pace at which learning and change take place. Especially when the world around is only designed to make an individual conform to the norms, rewards that conformity; punishes transgressions at the workplace, in family and in the community.

The programmes need to centre the intersecting realities of grassroots women workers beyond a diversity checklist, rather as an effort to meaningfully understand complex lived realities. This approach must hold the discomfort that, even with the best intentions, leadership programmes may not work for everyone. While these realities may be recognised, they cannot always be fully addressed or resolved through immediate solutions.

This resource book is an attempt to answer these questions as the Chingaari programme unfolded. It is not simply an instructional document; it is a testament to the learnings and unlearnings that emerged from the Chingaari process, as experienced by the facilitators and the fellows.

It gathers fragments of the sparks that lit up the Chingaari journey: moments when a woman worker spoke for the first time about her life at home and in the workplace; when someone recognised her own power or powerlessness; when a fellow questioned a practice she had once accepted as normal; when laughter cut through pain and helplessness; and when tears made room for clarity. These moments revealed what content mattered, what pedagogy worked; what principles and practices a leadership-building space truly requires.

We have written this resource book for people who want to build such spaces - spaces that are feminist in their principles, politics, process, and purpose. It is for organisations and institutions that want to do the slow and painstaking work of feminist leadership-building by centring the rights of grassroots women workers, both as women and as workers.

It is for facilitators who want to hold rooms where women feel safe enough not only to share their lived realities but also to critically examine their own privilege and position, rooted in caste, class, religion, and ability.

It is for grassroots workers who want to understand the visible and invisible labour that goes into nurturing leadership among those who are not structurally enabled to occupy leadership, or even to visualise themselves as leaders.

Ultimately, this resource book is standing as both memory and roadmap. It has been created so that organisations across India and beyond can build leadership spaces that are intentional, accountable, and grounded in feminist values.

This book exists because Chingaari showed us that leadership does not grow from instruction alone. It grows from being seen, heard, and held. It grows from recognising that existence and experience have political meaning.

Chingaari was a spark. This book ensures that the spark travels.

What is Chingaari?
What was the process of Chingaari?

Chingaari is a Gender Transformative Leadership (GTL) programme, designed by ICRW, Asia and WGH India to build leadership among young women working in community-based health organisations across tier-2 and tier-3 cities in India.

Women constitute nearly 70% of the health workforce in India, but only 25% occupy leadership positions (World Health Organization [WHO], 2019; Women in Global Health [WGH], 2023). These are women who form the backbone of India's health system yet barely one in four reaches a leadership role. This paradox has been consistently documented by the International Center for Research on Women's (ICRW) "Barriers to Breakthroughs: Women's Leadership Journeys in Indian Healthcare Organizations" study, which reveals how entrenched gender norms, lack of family and institutional support, and workplace cultures rooted in masculine traits like competition and in dismissing or talking over women's voices undermine women's leadership journeys in health systems. At the same time, gender-transformative spaces, empathetic supervision, and feminist mentorship have been shown to open pathways for women's growth.

Designed on the backbone of this research, Chingaari engaged 46 grassroots women health workers in all their diversity from tier 2 and tier 3 cities working with Community Based Organisations (CBOs) and Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs).These women, often the first responders in their communities, work under precarious conditions: low pay, contractual employment, occupational invisibility, and deeply gendered expectations at home and work. Yet they carry immense potential for leadership rooted in care, resilience, and local knowledge. Chingaari set out to create a space where this potential could be recognised, nurtured, and strengthened.

The objective of the programme was to:

- Empower women health workers from CBOs with tools and resources to promote gender equity.
- Provide a safe space for participants to explore feminist principles, power relationships, and gender-based health inequities.
- Recognize the intersectional challenges faced by women and support them in navigating them.
- Equip participants to see themselves as agents of change, increasing women's representation in leadership roles and contributing to gender-equitable health outcomes.

The 46 Chingari fellows participated in the programme across the two cohorts. They represented community health organisations that work closely with vulnerable and marginalised populations. Out of the 46, 44 identified themselves as cis-women, one as a transgender woman and one as an intersex person. One fellow was a person with a disability. For many, this was the first space where they could speak openly about workplace discrimination, aspirations, exhaustion, and possibilities.

The programme duration was six months. It followed a structure that included an in-person residential workshop in Delhi at the beginning (April 2025), followed by twelve online sessions on Zoom, spaced fifteen days apart.

The programme also integrated mixed-methods research, including data collection through surveys (pre- and post-tests, and feedback surveys after the in-person workshop and each module), in-depth interviews, and reflection workshops. This research sought to understand how participants experienced the journey.

Chingaari emphasised structural realities. It acknowledged that women do not face barriers because they lack capacity, but because systems, and institutions are unequal. The programme therefore situated leadership within the political, social, and cultural conditions that shape women's access to paid work and their rights in the workplace. The spark of feminist leadership grows not from titles, but from women recognising themselves as individuals who can identify structural and systemic injustices rooted in caste, gender, religion, and ableism, even when institutions fail to acknowledge them. It grows when women believe that rights and protections are integral to their identity as workers, and when they demand these rights not only for themselves but for everyone who is marginalised in one way or another.

For this reason, Chingaari was intentional about articulating a set of practices that shaped the politics of how leadership was imagined, both as a position and as a practice. The programme also intentionally included three workshops for the supervisors and organisational leaders of the fellows. This multi-level approach recognised that leadership cannot grow individually; it requires institutional commitment.

How is this resource book structured?

The resource book is organised to reflect the basic tenets that constitute the Chingaari programme. It begins with the conceptual foundations that shaped Chingaari and moving steadily toward practice, process, and reflection.

It starts by outlining the essential building blocks of feminist leadership i.e., gender, power, marginalisation, the world of work, and feminist action, as these concepts anchor the programme in the structural realities of workplace inequality. By starting here, the book establishes why leadership development for grassroots women must be connected to the conditions in which they work and inequities based on gender, caste, class, religion, ability that dominate the workplaces, their communities and health systems.

The resource book then turns to pedagogy. This chapter describes the pedagogical approach that held the programme together, detailing both the what and the how of feminist pedagogy. It begins by defining pedagogy as the philosophy and politics of learning. It explores what makes a pedagogy feminist i.e., its grounding in lived experience, structural analysis, critical thinking, and emotional engagement. It talks about the politics of facilitation: the importance of joy as much as generating discomfort through reflection to enable criticality, the power of lived realities, and the necessity of holding emotion and structure simultaneously. It also explains how Chingaari implemented this pedagogy: the methods used, the intentionality behind them, and the challenges and limitations encountered especially in online settings.

Thereafter, the book explores how integrating research into a feminist leadership programme makes visible the slow, uneven, and often uncomfortable processes through which leadership takes shape. It shows how research functions not as an external measure of impact, but as a feminist practice that deepens learning, challenges dominant ideas of leadership, and holds complexity rather than smoothing it over. By tracing how evidence, reflection, and collective meaning making evolve together, the chapter offers a grounded account of how feminist leadership is built in context, through lived experience, ethical accountability, and sustained engagement.

From there, the book moves into the operational processes that enable a feminist leadership programme to run, highlights the needs' assessment, and connection-building with the participants. It emphasises that feminist leadership programmes are built not only through content and pedagogy, but also requires programmatic processes that strengthens and sustains the programme. It also reflects on what organisations try to commit to at programming level if they want to build feminist leadership in their own contexts.

It concludes with our key learnings from Chingaari, capturing insights, challenges, and shifts that emerged over the course of the programme. Together, these chapters make an effort that readers not only understand what Chingaari offered, but also how and why feminist leadership-building requires a deep commitment to content, pedagogy, process, and continual learning driven by rights based principles.

How to use this resource book?

The resource book is not a checklist that promises transformation if followed step by step. It is not a template to be copied exactly. We wish the readers to treat the book as a companion - one that stays beside you while you imagine or plan a feminist leadership space of your own.

This resource book is an effort to create a comprehensive guide that reflects both the spirit, values and structure of Chingaari allowing readers to understand the "why," "what," and "how" of feminist leadership-building. It is designed to be used with flexibility. It is a guide that organisations can adapt based on their contexts, capacities, and the needs of the women they work with.

There are many ways to enter this book. You may choose to begin at the start and walk through the chapters as we did. Or you may come to it with a specific need such as:

"How do we introduce a conceptual building block?"
"How do we make pedagogy feminist?"
"How do we hold space for discomfort?"

If you are a facilitator, this book may help you understand how to hold a space grounded in feminist principles. You can use the book to design leadership journeys located in participants' lived realities marked by structural inequities. The content chapters will help you introduce concepts with clarity and relevance, while the pedagogy chapter will support you in crafting sessions that prioritise reflection, dialogue, and critical thinking where women feel safe enough to bring their full selves. It will remind you that facilitation in feminist spaces is not about "delivering content," but about listening carefully, pushing for reflection gently, and allowing room for complexity.

If you are an organisation or professional in an organisation, the book may help you see what behind-the-scenes work is necessary. It will offer you glimpses into the intentionality required to run a leadership programme that does not reproduce the very hierarchies it is trying to challenge. The book can serve as a roadmap for planning and running feminist leadership programmes. The chapter on processes lays out the organisational commitments required i.e, time, emotional labour, team alignment, ethical considerations, and institutional support. You can use these insights to assess your readiness, plan responsibly, and design structures that allow such programmes to thrive.


FORWARD
MOVING
KEEP
AND
POWER
YOUR
INTO
STEP

LEADERSHIP IS MY SUPERPOWER

If you are a researcher, this book may offer insights into how evidence can be woven ethically and sensitively into a leadership programme, and how research can strengthen such initiatives, inform their future direction, and ground capacity-building efforts in evidence-based understanding rather than anecdotal learning. Too often, capacity building and research intersect only through impact assessment or monitoring and evaluation (M&E). In Chingaari, we were deliberate about integrating research not merely as a tool for M&E - focused on what worked and what did not - but as a way to deepen our understanding of how learning unfolds when a diverse group of fellows and facilitators are engaged in an ongoing process of meaning-making.

If you are a funder or ally, the book will offer understanding on what feminist leadership-building programme for grassroot workers entails both as a technical intervention and a relational, political, and emotional process. It can inform and guide funding decisions, strengthen your understanding of what meaningful support looks like, and help you assess proposals with greater nuance by considering the time, emotional labour, and political commitment that feminist leadership-building programmes require to leave a meaningful impact.

You can photocopy, translate, or adapt any part of the book. What matters is not replication but intentionality to use the ideas of this book with a purpose to enable rights and justice for women workers at grassroots.

Use this book in the way it best serves you. Annotate it, question it, adapt it. Translate it into your context. Let it provoke you, gently, critically, and maybe surprisingly. Let it nudge you that leadership begins in the small act of recognizing inequalities caused by gender, caste, class,

religion and ability, that surrounds our lives. It begins in a story that shifts how someone sees their world, in a decision when someone decides to speak a little louder the next time.

Above all, let this book remind you that feminist leadership flourishes not with instruction, but from invitation. And you now hold that invitation in your hands.

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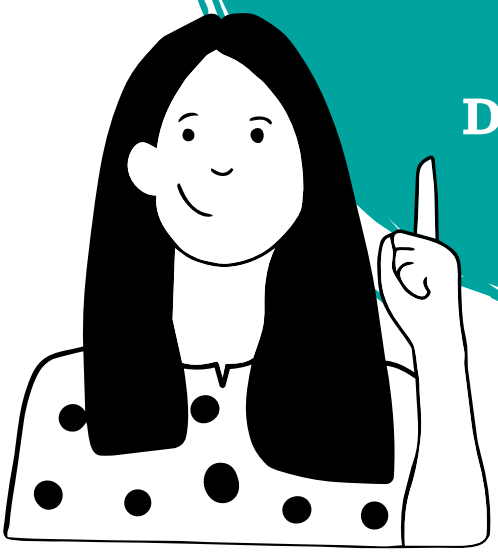
Patriarchy
Leadership
Power

Building the Foundations of Feminist Leadership

> The only way of knowing a socially constructed world is from within. We can never stand outside it.
>
> Dorothy E. Smith (1987)



What was the Content of Chingaari?

Chingaari recognised from the outset the journey of feminist leadership must begin by unpacking the systems within which the Chingaari Fellows work. Because these systems shape their lives long before leadership becomes a possibility. It impacts women's opportunities, aspirations and leadership trajectories long before they enter formal institutions.

The women who joined Chingaari were grassroots health workers working with community-based organisations across tier-2 and tier-3 cities. Many were nurses, programme staff in a CBO, outreach workers, counsellors, and field coordinators. Their work sustains public health systems, yet the labour they put into this work often remains invisible, informal, and undervalued (Uppal et al., 2024).The women who entered Chingaari arrived with a double inheritance: they were women, and they were workers in a feminised, undervalued, labouring sector. These women are a part of the workforce, where responsibility is high but recognition is low, where decision-making power is unevenly distributed. Many were located in community health organisations where leadership pathways were narrow, where mobility was shaped not just by skill, but by family responsibilities, workplace cultures, caste hierarchies, patriarchal norms, and lack of institutional recognition. They were not entering leadership spaces and occupying decision making positions because their work and lives were shaped by gendered expectations of care, caste-based hierarchies within health systems, religious and social norms that regulated mobility and respectability, and organisational cultures that kept authority away from frontline workers. The organisational study that informed Chingaari's design showed how women in the health workforce occupy a majority of frontline positions but remain severely under-represented in leadership roles.

It became imperative within the course of Chingaari to delink the leadership conversation from ability, charisma and characteristics, and centre structural conditions such as unpaid care work at home, informal employment status, gender-based discrimination at home and workplace, absence of labour protections, workplace violence, and limited access to institutional power. For us, this meant that leadership training could not start from personal ambition; it had to begin from structural awareness. Hence, Chingaari began by naming these realities, recognising that leadership

cannot be built without first understanding how gender, caste, power, and the world of work intersect to shape women's opportunities, choices, and constraints.

The concepts that we discussed in our first module were – gender and patriarchy, power, marginalisation and intersectionality, women as workers and their labour rights, feminist action, and feminist leadership. These building blocks formed the conceptual skeleton from which every session of Chingaari emerged. They were deliberately selected to understand and if possible respond to the real, structural inequities that surround all of us in all walks of life and experienced by these grassroots women workers particularly in the health sector.

The content of Chingaari positioned the gendered experience of these women and their experience as workers at the centre of multiple conversations: mapping how power circulates within organisations; recognising how caste, gender and religion impact visibility and growth; workplace violence; situating labour rights within feminist leadership; identifying feminist values; and exploring how leadership is shaped by structural constraints rather than individual skill alone. The learning process intentionally avoided a top-down model of transferring knowledge about leadership. Instead, it foregrounded the politics of labour, the histories of women health workers, and the burden of gendered expectations allowing participants to locate themselves within these structures before imagining transformation.

The content therefore served three key purposes:

- It supported women to see the workplace not as a neutral professional environment, but as a gendered institution shaped by unequal access to power, decision-making and resources.
- It aimed to strengthen the ability of women workers to name and analyse workplace inequalities rather than internalise them as personal shortcomings or lack of merit.
- It established that feminist leadership is inseparable from labour rights, safety, dignity, and institutional change.

This chapter sets the stage for the programme's core argument: feminist leadership cannot be imagined without understanding the structures within which women live, work, negotiate and lead.

Through the conceptual building blocks that follow, this chapter invites readers to enter the Chingaari content from the same point that participants did: with an understanding that leadership cannot be separated from identity, lived experience, and work. The section prepares the ground for the frameworks that shaped this feminist leadership programme explaining what content mattered, why it mattered, and what it generated inside this cohort of women health workers.

Why did we Choose this Content in the Context of Chingaari?

Rather than approaching leadership as a set of individual competencies to be acquired, Chingaari began with a different premise: leadership is shaped, enabled, and constrained by structures. Gender, caste, power, and the arrangement of work are not external forces that women can simply overcome through confidence or skill. They are active structures that impact everyday life in workplaces, determine whose labour is valued, and decide who is heard, promoted, protected, or silenced. The framework of Chingaari was designed to make these structures visible and to treat leadership as a political and institutional question.

The programme recognised that women's leadership journeys unfold within structures of power. For women health workers in community-based organisations, these structures operate simultaneously at multiple levels: within families, within organisations, within laws and policies, and within social norms. Leadership, therefore, cannot be understood without examining how these levels interact. Chingaari drew from feminist thinking to locate leadership within this web of relationships. This framing allowed the participants to reflect not just on their experience as women, but on the conditions under which these experiences are possible or impossible.

At the heart of this framework was an understanding of work and the workplace as gendered institutions. Health systems rely heavily on women's labour, particularly in frontline and care roles. The programme placed the "world of work" at the centre of discussions, expanding the idea of a workplace beyond office walls to include communities, homes, field sites, and informal settings. This shift was important because many participants worked in spaces where formal protections were weak or absent, and where power was exercised through norms, hierarchies, and unspoken rules rather than written policies alone.

The conceptual framework also foregrounded power as relational and dynamic. Chingaari approached power not only as domination or authority, but as something that flows through relationships, roles, bodies, and institutions. Participants were encouraged to examine how power operates in their workplaces, who holds it, how it is exercised, how it is resisted, and how it can be transformed. This analysis made visible both oppressive forms of power, such as exclusion, control, and violence, and generative forms of power, such as collective action, solidarity, and everyday acts of resistance. By doing so, the programme created space to imagine leadership as a conscious practice of power rather than a position at the top of a hierarchy.

Another key pillar of the framework was the recognition of marginalisation as structural rather than individual. Chingaari deliberately moved away from deficit-based explanations that locate exclusion in personal weakness, lack of merit, or limited ambition. Instead, it emphasised intersectionality, showing how caste, gender, religion, class, language and location intersect to produce unequal outcomes in workplaces. The objective was to recognise patterns that women workers often experience but struggle to name: being overlooked for promotion, being confined to "care" roles, being expected to prove competence repeatedly, or facing violence and harassment without institutional support. Leadership, in this framework, required the ability to recognise these patterns and challenge them collectively.

Importantly, Chingaari did not frame leadership as a linear journey from powerlessness to power. The programme acknowledged that women often exercise leadership in fragmented, constrained, and informal ways, within teams, communities, and moments of crisis, long before they receive formal recognition. The framework therefore validated everyday leadership practices while also insisting on the need for institutional change. This dual focus prevented leadership from becoming either an abstract and unachievable concept or a purely personal project.

Building Block No. 1

Gender and Patriarchy

Inequalities in leadership and workplaces are not isolated organisational problems; they are outcomes of a wider gendered social order that impacts labour, power, and opportunity across all spheres of life. Gender and patriarchy form the invisible architecture of workplaces. Gender determines who performs care and service work, whose labour is recognised as skilled, and who is positioned as legitimate decision-makers. Without addressing gender, a leadership building programme like any other programme risks treating a structural inequality as an individual lack in capacity, talent and interest.

These patterns begin in households extending into workplaces, shaping job roles, employment conditions, safety, and access to decision-making. Gender informs who performs care and service work and who performs strategic decision making. Patriarchy ensures whose labour is treated as skilled and valuable and whose time and bodies are considered expendable. As a result, women enter the world of work already carrying structural disadvantages, i.e, less time, less institutional support, and fewer recognised pathways to leadership. For instance, The **Government of India's National Time Use Survey[1] (2019)** shows that women spend an average of **7.2 hours per day on unpaid domestic and care work**, while men spend **2.8 hours**. (Government of India, Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation [MoSPI], 2019, Press Information Bureau, 2020)

Patriarchy and the gender binary is not sustained through ideas alone. It is sustained through a deeply unequal organisation of labour i.e., who works, who cares, who decides, and who is valued. Understanding this binary is essential because leadership is built on these foundations. Without naming how patriarchy and gender binary is constructed and maintained, leadership interventions risk addressing symptoms rather than structures. For a feminist leadership programme like Chingaari, grounded in the lived realities of women grassroots workers, unpacking these concepts is necessary. It allows leadership to be understood as something constrained and shaped by how gender binary and patriarchy organises work, time, and value in everyday life at home, workplace and in the community.

Gender divides labour and resources: Patriarchy is the structure that upholds it.

[1] A National Time Use Survey (TUS) measures how individuals in a country spend their time on various activities, from paid work to unpaid care, leisure, and self-care, providing crucial data for policy on gender equality and work-life balance, with India's National Statistics Office (NSO) conducting major surveys

Gender is not simply about identity or difference between women and men. It is a social system that assigns roles, expectations, and values to people based on perceived norms of femininity and masculinity. For instance, cooking, cleaning, childcare, elder care, and emotional labour are treated as women's responsibility, regardless of whether women are also engaged in paid work. Women devote **nearly 20% of their total time** to unpaid housework, while men spend **just 3%** of their time on similar activities. In urban areas, women spend nearly **335 minutes a day** on unpaid work compared to **40 minutes** by men. (MoSPI, 2019, Press Information Bureau, 2020). Hence, at the household level, unpaid care work limits time and energy available for paid work and professional growth.

The gender binary does more than classify bodies. It assigns meaning, value, and expectation. Masculinity is commonly associated with authority, rationality, leadership, control, and public life. Femininity is associated with care, patience, emotional labour, sacrifice, obedience. For example, The National Health Mission[2] classifies Accredited Social Health Activists (ASHAs)[3] as "volunteers" rather than employees. This classification indicates that care work at the front line is considered their duty because they are women.

[2] The National Health Mission (NHM) is India's flagship public health program, launched to provide accessible, affordable, and quality healthcare, especially to rural and vulnerable populations, through its sub-missions, the National Rural Health Mission (NRHM) and National Urban Health Mission (NUHM). NHM focuses on strengthening health systems, improving reproductive, maternal, neonatal, child, and adolescent health (RMNCH+A), managing communicable/non-communicable diseases, and increasing health workforce, employing community health volunteers like ASHAs to bridge gaps and ensure universal health coverage.

[3] Accredited Social Health Activists (ASHAs) are trained, female community health workers in India, selected from villages, who act as the crucial link between rural communities and the public health system, focusing on maternal/child health, immunization, sanitation, and creating health awareness to improve access and utilization of healthcare services

When we say "masculine" and "feminine," we often assume these qualities come naturally from being born male or female. While bodies may be biologically different, the meanings we attach to those bodies are social. In simple terms, society teaches us what is considered "appropriate" behaviour for men and women.

Qualities such as strength, aggression, leadership, and authority are labelled as masculine, while qualities like care, patience, obedience, sacrifice, and emotional labour are labelled as feminine. These labels are not facts of nature. They are rules created and repeated over time, through families, schools, religion, workplaces, and media.

What makes these rules powerful is that they are treated as natural. We are told:

- Men are naturally better leaders
- Women are naturally better caregivers
- Men are suited for public decision-making
- Women are suited for supporting roles

These ideas about masculinity and femininity directly shape the division of labour. Because care, patience, and service are labelled "feminine," work that involves caring for others such as childcare, elder care, nursing, community health work, and emotional support is treated as women's natural duty, not as skilled labour. As a result:

- This work is underpaid or unpaid
- It is expected to be done without complaint
- It is rarely linked to leadership or authority

On the other hand, decision-making, supervision, and leadership are associated with masculinity. These roles are seen as demanding authority, confidence, and control qualities society trains men to display.

This is how the gender binary becomes real in everyday life. It does not stay at the level of ideas. It shapes:

- Who does which work?
- Who is paid more?
- Who gets promoted ?
- Who is seen as a "natural" leader

Understanding this helps us see that leadership gaps are not about women lacking ability, but about how society trains us to value some kinds of work and behaviour over others.

Source - (Geetha, 2002, p. 35)

Division of Labour

The gender norms shape how work is divided and how skills are recognised. The gender-based division of labour refers to the way work is distributed according to gendered expectations. Women are disproportionately concentrated in roles that involve care, coordination, and emotional labour, while men are more likely to occupy positions associated with authority, decision-making, and technical expertise etc. Women's work, particularly care work, becomes normalised as a natural extension of femininity rather than recognised as skilled labour.

Patriarchy is a system of control that ensures that this division does not remain as differences between men or women. It ensures that this difference translates into inequality. It organises the different norms prescribed to men and women by gender binary into hierarchy, power, and control. For example, the gender binary naturalises that it is women's responsibility to perform reproductive labour, such as cooking, cleaning, taking care of the children and the elderly etc. However, patriarchy ensures that this labour by women remains undervalued, visible in responsibility but invisible in authority.

As a result women at workplaces are concentrated in jobs which are considered an extension of reproductive labour. In the Indian health sector, gender plays a defining role in determining who does what work. Women are overwhelmingly located in roles that require caregiving, emotional labour, patience, and continuous engagement with communities. These include nursing, community health work, counselling, sanitation, outreach, follow-up, and coordination. These roles are central to public health delivery, yet they are rarely framed as sites of expertise, authority, or leadership. For example, the health systems in India rely heavily on women's labour, particularly in frontline and community-based roles. Women constitute nearly 100% of ASHA workers, 80% of nurses. In private hospitals, the largest employers in healthcare, women's representation in leadership ranges between 25–30%, even though women constitute a far higher proportion of the workforce. (Das & Singh, 2022)

In community-based health organisations, this division often takes subtle forms. Women are assigned fieldwork that requires long hours, physical travel, and emotional engagement with communities. They are expected to manage crises, negotiate resistance, and maintain relationships, often without adequate institutional backing. At the same time, planning, budgeting, and strategic decisions are frequently handled by a smaller group that is more insulated from field realities.

Patriarchy functions as a system through which the gender binary is established and maintained as "unequal" yet "natural" and "stable" in society. It operates by concentrating power, resources, and decision-making authority in specific groups, which happens to be "men". Even if we see individual men benefitting from patriarchy, to understand it as individual men dominating individual women would be limiting. It is rather a broader social and institutional structure that privileges masculinities and devalues femininity. This inequality is hierarchy is reflected in everything that is associated with femininity and masculinity such as behaviour (Crying Vs Strong), characteristics (Emotional Vs Practical), labour (Care Work Vs Paid Job).

Patriarchy operates across multiple interconnected domains, including labour, resources, sexuality, laws and rights, knowledge, and culture. These domains together form what the session material describes as a "wheel of patriarchy", where each element reinforces the others. For example, unequal divisions of labour are reinforced by cultural norms, legal frameworks, and knowledge systems that legitimise men's authority and women's subordination patriarchy was not presented as a system where all men are powerful and all women are powerless. The session explicitly recognised that power is unevenly distributed among men as well, shaped by caste, class, religion, region, disability, and other social hierarchies. Patriarchy intersects with these structures, producing differentiated experiences of privilege and its lack.

Patriarchy at Home and at the Workplace

Patriarchy operates both within families and within workplaces, in similar and interconnected ways. At home and family, patriarchy structures the division of resources and opportunities, i.e, who controls money, who makes decisions, and who cooks, who takes care of the children. These patterns then travel into the workplace, shaping who takes the decision, who occupies the organisational position that deals with institutional funding. It shapes organisation job roles, hierarchies, and leadership norms.

Gendered expectations position women as "naturally" suited to care both at home and the workplace. Because this work is seen as an extension of womanhood rather than as a learned skill, it is often undervalued, underpaid, and excluded from leadership pathways. The assumption that women are inherently caring makes their labour appear limitless. This is used to justify discrimination at workplace.

The ICRW's research on leadership shows women are concentrated in junior and middle-level positions, while senior leadership roles remain male-dominated. In 79% of the organisations, the Board Chair was a man, and in 79%, the Chief Executive or Head of Organisation was also a man. (Uppal et al., 2024). Despite women forming the backbone of healthcare delivery, they hold only 18% of leadership roles in the sector. (World Health Organization [WHO], 2021) (WHO National Health Workforce Accounts,).

Division of Resources and Opportunity

Patriarchy stabilises power partly by controlling who owns or accesses key resources: land, money and knowledge. Where control over these resources is skewed, opportunities follow the same skewed lines. Opportunity is not just about getting a job or a title. Opportunity determines how much freedom a person has to make choices, how much they can grow, and how seriously they are taken in society and institutions. Patriarchy does not merely exclude women from power; it organises everyday life in ways that make dependence appear natural and independence appear risky (Geetha, 2002, p. 35).

When women lack access to resources, they may technically be "working," but they are not free. Their decisions are shaped by fear of loss of income, safety, family support, or social acceptance which curtails their freedom. Because it is not just legal equality, but the real ability to act without fear. (Menon, 2012, p. 120)

Patriarchy works by tying women's identities to care, sacrifice, and adjustment. When women are expected to serve without control over resources, their labour strengthens institutions but does not strengthen their own position within them. Opportunity, in this sense, is not just access, it is the ability to convert effort into authority. (Sangari, 1999, p. 19)

This is why the recognition of this division of resources is central to feminist leadership. When women do not have or control resources, they lack economic and social security. Hence, despite women's heavy presence in frontline health and community work does not automatically lead to higher salary or leadership. Women may be central to service delivery, but when their labour is framed as extension of their identity, as care and service rather than strategic, it does not translate into institutional authority.

Access to material resources changes not only women's income but their **social position and bargaining power.** When women earn low or unstable incomes, they cannot afford to challenge unfair practices or invest in their own growth. Ownership and control over land significantly enhance women's ability to participate in household decision-making, reduce their vulnerability, and increase their social status within the family and community. (Agarwal, 1994, p. 145)

Using household and individual surveys, the National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5) show that only about 8.3% of women own land individually, while another ~23.4% own land jointly; overall ownership (alone or jointly) remains substantially lower for women than men.

Source:
(Mahato et al., 2024)
(International Institute for Population Sciences [IIPS] & ICF, 2021)

Over 90% of working women in India are in informal employment, compared to about 82% of men. And in these informal workers, men earn 50–70% more than women;

Nearly one in three working women is an unpaid family worker, compared to about one in ten men.

Among regular salaried workers, men's earnings exceed women's by 20–60%; and among the self-employed, men earn four to five times more than women.

Source: (Oxfam India, 2022)

Almost 100% of ASHAs are women. Over 80% of nurses and midwives are women. ASHAs are officially designated as "volunteers", (Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, Government of India, 2005) not workers. They are not paid a regular salary. Instead their fixed honoraria where provided, it ranges roughly from ₹1,000 to ₹6,000 per month, depending on the state. Their earnings come from task-based incentives tied to targets such as institutional deliveries, immunisation, family planning, and surveys. Average monthly earnings reported across states generally fall between ₹8,000 and ₹10,000, despite long working hours and expanding responsibilities. Payment is irregular, conditional, and task-based, not a fixed salaried wage. There is no guaranteed minimum wage or statutory benefits provided, even though their role is central to public health.

Patriarchy and Workplace

Source: Module on "Patriarchy at Workplace," Chingaari 2025 Curriculum

Rewards and Punishments

Patriarchy is sustained not only through laws or overt control but through everyday systems of approval and disapproval that shape behavior from a young age. Girls and women are often rewarded for compliance with gender norms, being accommodating, self-sacrificing, or prioritizing family over personal ambition, through praise, affection, social respect, or practical support such as childcare, domestic help, or permission to work. Even seemingly positive milestones like marriage or local employment are structured as rewards for conformity, while deviation invites criticism, withdrawal of care, or social risk. In this way, everyday reinforcement of norms quietly teaches women which choices are acceptable and which carry consequences, embedding gendered expectations in both private and public life.

Sanctions at home and in the community enforce gender norms through constant monitoring, correction, and social pressure. Girls and women who resist expectations around domestic work, education, marriage, dress, or behavior face criticism, gossip, restrictions on mobility, withdrawal of support, or even loss of shelter and financial security, while boys who show care, gentleness, or emotion are shamed and pressured to conform to ideals of aggressiveness and earning. This repeated policing cultivates self-surveillance, fear of judgment, and material risk, ensuring that women remain primarily responsible for caregiving and men for earning, while making resistance socially and economically costly.

TRIVIA

Marriage functions as one of the most powerful reward structures. Women who conform to expectations around behaviour, dress, sexuality, and obedience are seen as "suitable" and are more likely to receive family backing in marriage negotiations. Marriage is presented not only as a personal milestone but as a form of social security, access to housing, economic support, and social legitimacy. Conformity is thus linked directly to safety and status.

Within marriage, continued compliance often brings further rewards. A woman who prioritises her husband's career over her own may receive emotional validation, financial security, or approval from extended family. In many households, a woman who does not "cause trouble," avoids conflict, and absorbs stress is described as "adjusting well," a phrase that carries social praise even when it masks exhaustion or loss of opportunity.

- Over 95% of married men are part of the labour force. Only about 23–25% of married women are part of the labour force.
- Less than 5% are classified as out of the labour force. Around 75% of married women are out of the labour force.
- Among those men not working, almost none cite domestic duties as the reason. Among married women who are not working, nearly 90% report "domestic duties" as the primary reason. Marriage secures men's participation in paid work, while it removes most women from it.

Source - (Government of India, Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation [MoSPI], 2023) (Press Information Bureau, 2023)

Similarly women who begin travelling for work regularly, or returning home are told that they are "not managing the household properly," "too ambitious," or their priorities are misplaced. Women who assert herself in meetings, challenge decisions, or set boundaries are often described as "too aggressive," "too emotional," "not collaborative," or "difficult to work with." Unlike formal disciplinary action, these labels travel quietly through informal feedback, performance appraisals, or casual remarks to supervisors and influence promotion decisions and leadership assessments without ever being recorded.

For transgender and non-binary people, sanctions are often **more immediate, more severe, and more structural**, affecting nearly every aspect of life. Gender non-conforming children face **rejection or violence within the family**. Families attempt to forcibly "correct" behaviour through restrictions, punishment, or coercion. This includes pressure to suppress gender expression or undergo unwanted medical or religious interventions. transgender and non-binary people may face **public ridicule, social exclusion, or ostracisation**. They are denied housing, refused entry into community spaces, or treated as a source of shame for their families.

Rewards and punishments do not appear in a single form; they exist on a wide spectrum. Their power lies precisely in this range.

At one end are very small, everyday sanctions such as a disapproving smile, raised eyebrows, a passing comment, a moment of silence. At the harsher end of the spectrum exists severe sanctions like being denied education, being forced to leave work, being pressured into early or unwanted marriage, being socially cut off from family or community, or in some cases facing physical or emotional violence within private spaces or public settings. Similarly rewards can be as simple as verbal praise for being a "good daughter," a "responsible wife,". They can also take more tangible forms: continued financial support, help with childcare, permission to study or work, or emotional backing during difficult moments. In some families, long-term compliance is rewarded with significant material benefits, such as access to housing, inheritance, or family property, or more say in household decisions.

These rewards and punishments work not because they are always applied, but because they are **possible**. These rewards communicate that safety, belonging, and security are available to those who conform. Punishments communicate that stepping outside prescribed roles carries the risk of exclusion, loss of support and protection.

Because the punishments vary in intensity, people do not wait for the harshest outcome to change their behaviour. Most learn to adjust early, responding to the smallest signs of disapproval. Over time, this creates a powerful system of self-regulation. Women and girls limit themselves not because they are directly punished, but because they understand the range of consequences that breaking the norms might bring. Hence, many women limit their ambitions not because they lack capability or aspiration, but because the penalties for stepping forward are too high.

At the workplace women's labour is treated as flexible and dispensable, even when it is essential, while authority and leadership remain tied to stable, protected employment that women are far less likely to access. As long as women are concentrated in low-paid and insecure roles, leadership will remain structurally out of reach, not because of a lack of ability or ambition, but because the conditions are not enabling. When women face sanctions for visibility and ambition, at home and at work, accessing and exercising leadership becomes a high-risk activity. Capacity building programmes on leadership question what organisations reward, whose labour is valued, and how security is distributed. Hence, a gender transformative leadership programme must confront how patriarchy shapes work, security, recognition, and leadership.

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Building Block No. 2

Power

Power was chosen as a core building block because feminist leadership cannot be understood, practiced, or sustained without a critical engagement with how power works. In the context of Chingaari, power was approached as omnipresent, something that is deeply embedded and present in everyday work, relationships, institutions, and even in how people see themselves and others. Leadership development often assumes power as a reward that comes after skill, confidence, or position. Chingaari attempted to challenge this notion.

For us, as a feminist leadership building programme, engaging with power was essential to challenge the narrow idea of empowerment as confidence-building alone. It treated power as the reality through which leadership is already being practiced. Drawing from feminist analyses of power, particularly those that challenge the idea of power as only domination, the curriculum expanded the understanding of power to include its multiple sources, forms, and expressions (Batliwala, 2007; Batliwala, 2010; Menon, 2012). This allowed power to be seen not only as something that constrains, but also as something that can be exercised, negotiated, resisted, and transformed.

Chingaari worked with women located at the lower and middle rungs of organisational hierarchies, often in roles with high responsibility, immense work load and limited authority. In such contexts, power rarely appears in overt or visible ways. It operates through contracts, supervision styles, access to information, performance metrics, mobility, and informal rules about who can speak, question, or refuse. *Power at the Workplace* sessions recognised that if these dynamics remained invisible, leadership building would risk becoming disconnected from participants' actual working conditions.

Grassroots women workers constantly navigate power relations between institutions and communities, supervisors and field staff, donors and implementers, families and workplaces. They make choices within constraints, balance competing demands by various stakeholders which includes their organisation, family, community in which they work; and absorb risks that others higher in the hierarchy at the workplace may never encounter.

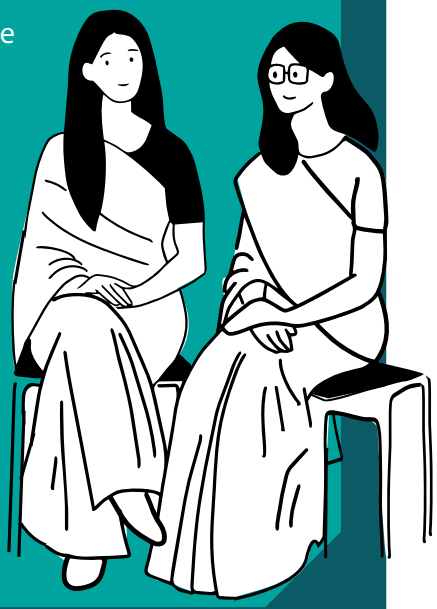
Also, for grassroots women health workers, power shapes whose knowledge is taken seriously, whose labour is visible, who can refuse unsafe work, and who bears the consequences of organisational decisions. Without naming and analysing power, these realities remain isolated and singular experiences rather than larger patterns of patriarchy, caste-based hierarchies and religious biases.

Power was introduced to give participants a language and framework to understand their workplace experiences as shaped by structural power relations, shifting leadership discussions from personality to politics, systems, and accountability. The goal was to move leadership development away from a focus on individuals and towards collective engagement with power at the organizational level, highlighting how inequality persists even in rights-based or community-oriented spaces. This approach encouraged participants, professionals, and organizations to recognize, value, and support frontline leadership while reflecting on how unequal power structures shaped by gender, caste, religion, and ability influence who leads, how leadership is recognized, and whose leadership is nurtured.

In developing this building block on power, the Chingaari curriculum drew strongly from the feminist articulation of power developed by Srilatha Batliwala. Batliwala is a leading Indian feminist scholar and practitioner whose work has shaped feminist movements, leadership building, and rights-based practice in India and globally. Her writing brings together theory, movement experience, and grounded realities of people working for social change.

The primary resource used was a primer written by Batliwala titled, "All About Power: Understanding Social Power and Power Structures" (CREA, New Delhi; also available in Hindi as Sabhi Baatein Satta Ki).

The book presents power as relational and dynamic, and examines where power exists, how it operates, and how it is sustained through visible, hidden, and invisible forms. It also outlines different expressions of power, including power over, power to, power with, power within, and power under.



Methodologically, the framework was used to help participants map power in their own workplaces by identifying where power is located, how it flows, and how it is expressed in visible, hidden, and invisible ways. Analysis of different forms of power, including power over, power to, power with, power within, and power under, were applied to understand experiences of power at work and beyond. This approach grounded leadership learning in critical reflection and lived realities.

Importantly, this building block laid the groundwork for feminist leadership as a conscious practice of power. Feminist leadership, as imagined in Chingaari, is not about escaping power or replacing one authority with another. It is about understanding how power operates, becoming accountable for how one uses it, and intentionally working to shift unequal power relations. **Without this grounding, leadership risks becoming aspirational rather than transformative.**

Power Exists in Relationships, not only in Positions

Power does not belong only to people with formal titles. It exists in relationships. It flows between people depending on context. A person may have power in one situation and very little in another. Understanding power in this way helps explain why women can feel responsible for outcomes at work but still feel unable to influence decisions.

For example, a woman working as a community mobiliser may not hold a formal leadership role, but she often shapes how work is done. She may not be involved in designing a programme, but she plays a key role in how it actually works. She decides how to approach families, how to explain health messages, how to respond to resistance, and how to handle conflict. This is power in practice, even if it is not named as such. At the same time, the same worker may have little control over her workload, deadlines, or targets. She may be informed of decisions after they are made. She may feel unable to refuse extra work or unsafe conditions. Seeing power as relational helps make sense of this contradiction. It shows that leadership and power are already present in everyday work, even when formal authority is absent.

Power also exists within families. Decisions about when a woman can travel, attend meetings, or take on new responsibilities are often shaped by family members. These decisions may be framed as concern or tradition, but they limit choices and opportunities. Understanding power in relationships allows these experiences to be seen not as personal issues, but as shaped by hierarchy and social norms.

Power is Built into Systems and Structures

Power does not operate only through people. It is built into systems. Organisational policies, contracts, schedules, reporting formats, and work cultures all carry power. They shape what is possible and what is risky. These structures and systems decide who gets job security, who remains on short-term contracts, who can take leave easily, and who cannot. For grassroots women workers, this often means living with insecurity. Short-term contracts, unclear job roles, and lack of protection make it difficult to question decisions or demand better conditions. **Power, in this sense, is not about intention; it is about design.**

At home, power operates through expectations around care work. Women are often expected to manage household responsibilities alongside paid work, shaping how much time and energy they can give to their jobs. These arrangements may feel normal, but they distribute power unevenly.

Work routines carry power. Work schedules that assume unlimited availability ignore care responsibilities at home. For instance, field visits planned early in the morning or late in the evening, meetings called at short notice, deadlines may be set without considering how long the work actually takes etc. For women workers, these create pressure because their time is not freely available. Most women manage care work at home, i.e, cooking, cleaning, childcare, caring for elders, alongside paid work. When work schedules ignore this reality, women are forced to stretch themselves, work longer hours, or make personal sacrifices. If a woman cannot attend a late meeting because she has to care for a child or elderly parent, she may be seen as less committed, even though the problem lies in how work time is organised. In this way, power operates through schedules by rewarding those who can be endlessly available and penalising those who cannot.

Similarly, reports focus on numbers - how many households were visited, how many meetings were held, how many beneficiaries were reached. While numbers are important, they often fail to capture the quality of relationships, trust-building, conflict resolution, and emotional labour that community work requires. A woman community worker may spend hours addressing queries of community members, negotiating resistance or backlash, or supporting a family through a crisis. This work is crucial for programme success, but it may not fit neatly into reporting formats. Sole reliance on numbers can not capture the relationship building work. Hence, community work often appears less skilled or less important, even though it is central to impact. Power operates here by deciding what counts as "real work" and what remains invisible.

Together, these organisational systems and processes shape whose labour is recognised. Office-based planning work is often seen as strategic and skilled, while fieldwork is seen as routine or natural, especially when done by women. Care, coordination, and emotional labour is expected out of them but it is not acknowledged. Over time, this impacts promotions, pay, and leadership opportunities. Understanding how work routines carry power helps shift the focus away from

individual effort and towards organisational design. It allows workers and organisations to ask important questions:

Whose time are we assuming is flexible? Whose work is being measured and valued? And who is being asked to adjust, again and again, without recognition?

Power comes from Multiple Sources

Power does not come from one source alone. It comes from many sources that often work together. These include control over money and resources, access to information and training, authority linked to job roles, and social identities such as caste, gender, religion, age, language, and education. One major source of power is control over money and resources. This includes who decides budgets, who approves expenses, who controls transport, phones, or office space, and who decides how resources are distributed.

For example, a manager who controls the budget may decide which areas receive more funding or which activities are prioritised. A field worker may be expected to carry out tasks but may have little say in how resources are allocated. When women workers do not control resources, they often have to manage work through personal adjustment or unpaid effort. There are also situations where women workers are asked to attend training or events but are not provided support for what happens at home in their absence. If childcare support or flexible arrangements are not considered, women may leave children with neighbours, older daughters, or elderly relatives. This unpaid care arrangement makes participation possible, but at a personal cost that is not recognised as work-related.

Ideas about what counts as "professional," "skilled," or "important" also produce power. For instance, a staff member who speaks English fluently may be taken more seriously in meetings, even if they have limited contact with the community. A manager may have authority not only because of their role, but also because of caste privilege or access to donor spaces. On the other hand, a woman who has worked for years in the community may have deep knowledge, but her expertise may be seen as informal or secondary.

These differences are not accidental. Power inequalities persist because **multiple sources of advantage come together and reinforce each other**, often in the same people, roles, or spaces. When these advantages align, they create a strong position of authority that is difficult to question. When they do not, people (especially grassroots women workers) face layered disadvantage.

Some of the key sources of power are **caste, gender, education, language, location, and job role**. Among these, **caste and gender play a particularly powerful role** in shaping who is trusted, heard, and promoted.

Power inequalities persist because multiple forms of advantage reinforce one another. Power at work is connected to larger systems such as patriarchy, caste hierarchy, religion, and urban–rural inequality. These structures shape whose authority is accepted, who feels safe in certain spaces, and who has access to networks and opportunities. Leadership building becomes transformative when it accounts for how different forms of advantage operate together. Recognising how caste and gender interact with other forms of privilege is essential for building feminist leadership.

Power takes Different Forms and Expressions

Power is often imagined only as control or domination. But power appears in many forms. Some power limits choices. Some power enables action. Some power grows through collective effort. Some power exists within a person as self-belief or clarity. Some power appears as strategies to survive within unfair conditions.

For example, "power over" appears when a worker cannot refuse extra tasks without fear of consequences. "Power to" appears when a woman finds ways to solve problems despite limited resources. "Power with" appears when workers support each other, share information, or raise concerns together. "Power within" appears when a woman begins to trust her own judgment. "Power under" appears when someone chooses silence or compliance to protect themselves.

Recognising these forms matters because it prevents judging women's actions through narrow ideas of confidence or courage. It allows everyday strategies of survival and care to be seen as responses to power, not personal weakness.

Consider a workplace where a senior staff member is an upper-caste man, speaks English fluently, has a formal degree, and works from the head office in a city. His authority does not come only from his job title. It is reinforced by caste privilege that has historically placed people like him closer to power and decision-making. His gender allows him to be assertive without being labelled aggressive. His language skills and education match what organisations often define as "professional." His urban location gives him access to networks, donors, and visibility. All these advantages come together, making his authority appear natural and unquestioned.

Now contrast this with a woman community worker from a dalit community, working in a rural area. She may have years of experience, deep knowledge of the community, and strong relationships with local families. However, her caste may lead others to question her credibility. Her gender may mean her confidence is read as disrespect. If she speaks in a local language rather than English, her inputs may be seen as less polished or strategic. Her role as a field worker places her lower in the organisational hierarchy. None of these factors alone fully explain her limited power, but together, they create a situation where her leadership is consistently undervalued.

Caste and gender also interact in everyday ways. For instance, an upper-caste woman in an organisation may face gender-based barriers, but she may still find it easier to access leadership spaces than a Dalit or Adivasi woman. Meetings may feel safer, her mistakes may be forgiven, and her ambition may be encouraged. A marginalised-caste woman, on the other hand, may be closely watched, expected to prove herself repeatedly, or discouraged from speaking.

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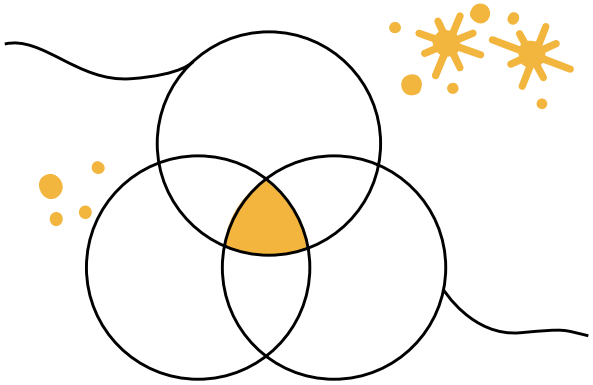
Building Block No. 3

Marginalisation and Intersectionality



In the Chingaari curriculum, marginalisation was approached as something that is made and maintained through systems of caste, gender, religion, merit, and geography, which are experienced in everyday life at work, in institutions, and within communities. This framing was central to how feminist leadership was imagined and articulated within the programme. This building block focused on marginalisation as an experience of exclusion due to structural conditions produced through social, economic, and political arrangements.

Marginalisation was chosen because without understanding it, leadership-building risks misunderstanding inequality as a personal limitation rather than a structural outcome. Many leadership programmes implicitly assume that if individuals are given skills, confidence, or exposure, they will be able to move forward. Research on women's leadership shows that traditional leadership and capacity development programmes focussing on individual skills, confidence and exposure, but fail to address the structural barriers such as social norms, discrimination, and lack of institutional support, that are barriers to women's advancement into leadership positions (Hoare & Gell, 2009; Batliwala, 2010). Grassroots women, in particular, encounter institutional exclusion and socio-cultural barriers that cannot be resolved by training alone (ICRW, 2023).

Scholars and feminist practitioners therefore argue for gender-responsive and structural models of leadership development that explicitly work with power relations and inequality, rather than focusing only on individual attributes (Hoare & Gell, 2009; Batliwala, 2010; Oxfam, 2013). For women working at the grassroots, this assumption does not hold. Their exclusion from power, recognition, and opportunity is not incidental. It is also not the result of individual failure. It is produced through deep-rooted hierarchies, caste, gender, religion that is foundational to how our society is arranged. It decides who belongs at the centre and who is pushed to the margins.

In the context of Chingaari, participants came from diverse caste, religious, regional, and class locations. Their experiences at work were shaped not only by gender, but also by whether they were Dalit or Savarna, Muslim or Hindu, urban or rural, English-speaking or not, formally educated

or trained on the job. These differences also mapped onto the organisational positions the fellows occupied. Just as caste, religion, language, and location shape who is heard and trusted, they also shape organisational hierarchies. And these hierarchies decide whose labour is counted as "leadership" and whose is treated as "support."

Some fellows were placed in senior or decision-making roles such as programme leads, state coordinators, or technical anchors. Many occupied mid-level supervisory and management positions such as programme officers, supervisors, or team leads. A significant share worked at the organisational margins as field staff and community-facing workers, mobilisers, outreach workers, and community coordinators, where they held communities together and ensured implementation, but remained farthest from recognition, voice, and formal power. These organisational hierarchies quietly determine who can shape decisions and who is expected to carry responsibility without power. who gets proximity to decision-making and who is kept at the frontline of labour without institutional authority. Choosing this building block allowed the programme to move away from deficit-based narratives, such as "lack of confidence," "lack of merit," or "lack of skills" and instead focus on how systems distribute resources, recognition, and authority unevenly. This shift was necessary to ground feminist leadership in justice rather than individual advancement.

Marginalisation, therefore, could not be explained through a single axis. **By centering marginalisation as a building block, Chingaari was able to build an intersectional understanding of power and exclusion,** i.e, how multiple forms of oppressive structures operate together, intensifying exclusion for some while allowing relative access to others. This framing helps recognize that women's leadership barriers are not shaped by gender alone, but by how gender is produced and experienced through caste, religion, class, language, ability, and location.

Intersectionality was imperative to a gender-transformative leadership programme because it clarifies that oppression is not "additive". Scholarship on Feminist leadership argues that leadership development becomes transformative only when it confronts these intersecting structures because leadership is not simply a set of competencies; it is shaped by how power is distributed, legitimised, and protected within institutions and society (Riha et al., 2025; Adaptation Fund Board, 2022).

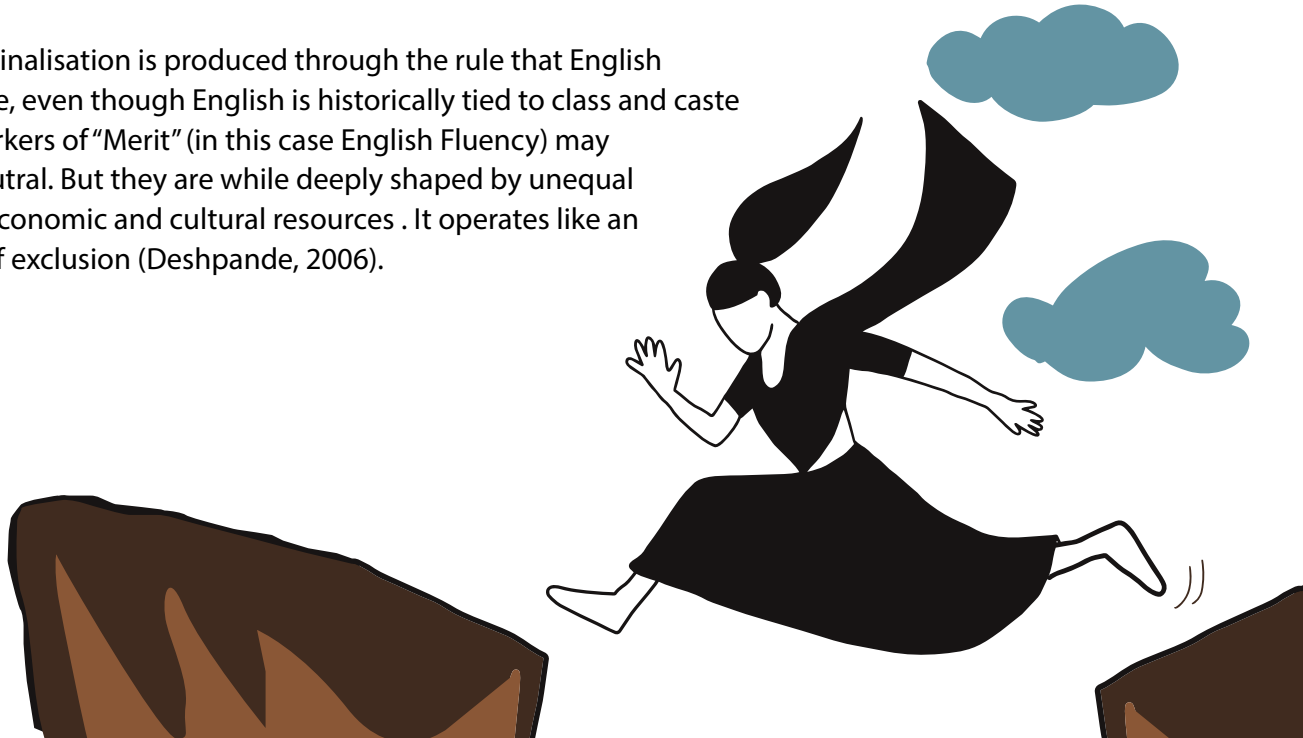
Marginalisation as a Structural Reality and not as an Individual Deficit

Marginalisation was unpacked as a condition created by unequal access to resources, recognition, safety, and opportunity. Marginalisation is often spoken about as if it is a personal experience. For instance, often at the workplace we hear a person is not confident enough, educated enough, smart enough, or capable enough. This understanding is flawed.

Marginalisation is a structural reality: a condition created when society, institutions, and workplaces function in ways that repeatedly keep certain people away from resources, recognition, and power. One simple example would be, a worker from a rural area may be treated as less competent simply because she is not fluent in English, even if she has in-depth field work understanding. It is not an individual weakness. It is an outcome of unequal systems. Because the problem is not that the worker lacks leadership potential, intelligence, or effort. The problem is that the system has decided what competence should look like. It has chosen markers that many rural women have historically been denied access to ,i.e, English-medium schooling, urban exposure, presentation skills, confidence in elite professional spaces. These are not neutral skills. They are shaped by class location, geography, and caste access over generations.

English has become more than a language. It becomes a marker of merit and tool for marginalisation. People who speak English fluently are seen as "sharp" and "professional," and are more likely to be present in decision-making spaces. Meanwhile, non-English speaking rural workers may be asked to "just handle field implementation". She may have extensive field experience; know how caste works in the village, which households will resist vaccination, when women face domestic violence, why a girl drops out of school, what makes a local leader hostile, how communal tensions shape health access. Yet in the office, her competence may be judged through English fluency: how she writes emails, speaks in meetings, or presents.

Here, marginalisation is produced through the rule that English intelligence, even though English is historically tied to class and caste access. Markers of "Merit" (in this case English Fluency) may appear neutral. But they are while deeply shaped by unequal access to economic and cultural resources . It operates like an ideology of exclusion (Deshpande, 2006).

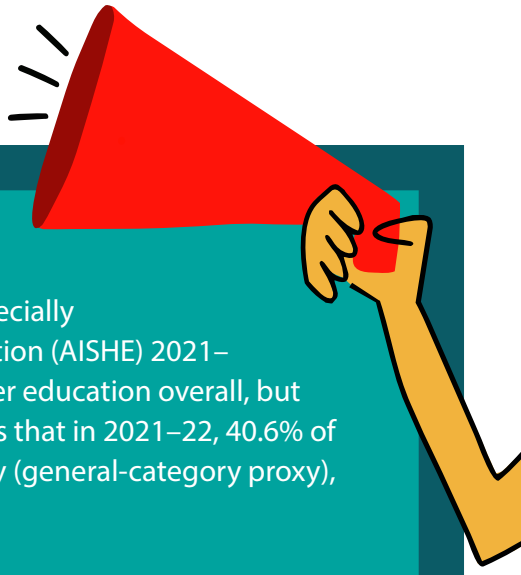


Unequal systems and spaces make some people's strengths visible and valuable, while invisibilising bodies, labours and experience of others. Often times these invisibilisation are shaped by caste hierarchies, patriarchy, and bias against minorities.

For instance, caste affects who gets money, education, and opportunities. It also affects whose voice is taken seriously in society including the workplace. It also shapes the unequal sharing of knowledge and authority. Dalit women's experiences are often treated as personal pain to feel sorry about, or as "stories," but not as knowledge that can guide decisions or leadership. In other words, Dalit women may be present in the room, but their thinking is not treated as valuable enough to shape the direction of the work. This is how exclusion continues even inside spaces that talk about equality (Rege, 2006).

In workplaces, we see this often. A Dalit woman worker may understand the community better than anyone else. She may know which families are being discriminated against, what forms of caste violence are happening, and what people are afraid to say openly. But when she shares this, her inputs may be dismissed. At the same time, when an upper-caste colleague says similar things in English or policy language, it is seen as professional and strategic. Over time, this becomes a pattern: some people are trusted to speak and decide, while others are expected only to work on the ground. Rege helps us see that this is not just personal bias. It is caste shaping whose knowledge becomes "merit" and whose knowledge is treated as less important (Rege, 2006).

So, the same workplace can feel completely different depending on one's position. The same world that feels normal, fair, and accessible to some people can feel exhausting, humiliating, and unsafe for others. It is not because they others are less competent, but because the world was not designed with them in mind. In this way, marginalisation is produced not by personal failure, but by institutional norms that reward certain kinds of knowledge and expression, and punish others. Marginalisation is produced not by personal failure, but by institutional norms that decide the parameter of competence and leadership. These norms are treated as neutral signs of "merit" and "good performance." But they are deeply shaped by unequal access, and therefore closely tied to caste, class, gender, religion, and ability.



Government of India education statistics clearly show that caste inequality continues to shape access to education, especially beyond school. According to the All India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE) 2021–22, out of every 100 young people, around 28 are enrolled in higher education overall, but only about 26 SC youth and 21 ST youth are enrolled. AISHE shows that in 2021–22, 40.6% of total higher-education enrolment came from the "Others" category (general-category proxy), while SC students were 15.3% and ST students 6.3% of enrolment.

According to NFHS-5, 56.3% of women have completed 10 or more years of schooling, compared to 62.1% of men. Which means that girls and women face additional constraints in sustaining education.

Together, these official statistics show caste and gender inequality shaping education access structurally, long before questions of jobs, skills, or leadership arise.

Similarly, when leadership is defined as being assertive, always available, travelling freely, and staying late for meetings, it rewards those who carry fewer restrictions and responsibilities. Patriarchy makes this unequal from the beginning. Many women workers have care responsibilities at home and face social monitoring of mobility and behaviour. They are judged not on the quality of their work, but on whether they can perform a model of "leadership presence" built around an idea of freedom and uninterrupted time that does not take into account gender division of labour, time and resources.

Ableism shapes these norms too. Workplaces often assume that everyone can travel without difficulty, speak continuously in long meetings, attend sessions without breaks, and function without accommodations. Workers with disabilities may then be seen as less committed or less capable not because they cannot lead, but because the workplace refuses to adapt.

This is where the idea of the "good employee" becomes critical. In many organisations, a good employee is imagined as someone who is always available, always agreeable, able to travel anytime, able to extend working hours without complaint, able to speak confidently in meetings, and able to work without bringing "personal issues" into professional spaces. When institutions reward professionalism and leadership, they not only reward merit. They also reward social advantage. Because for grassroots women, especially those from marginalised castes and communities, these expectations are not realistic. Many carry care work at home, face restrictions on mobility, have unequal access to transport and safety, and experience discrimination that

cannot be kept outside office walls. **The standard of the "good employee" therefore becomes a form of structural violence: it rewards those who are already structurally supported and punishes those who are not.**

This is why feminist leadership building cannot stay at the level of confidence and skills. **If a leadership programme teaches rural women to "speak up" without addressing the system that punishes their speech, it risks becoming cruel.** If it teaches women to perform professionalism without questioning which culture is treated as professional, it risks reproducing patriarchal and brahminical structures. If it teaches merit as individual excellence without exposing caste-class advantage, it risks legitimising inequality.

For a feminist leadership programme for grassroots women workers, therefore, marginalisation must be identified, located and understood within the institution: who gets recognised as competent, who gets forgiven, who gets invited, who gets mentored, whose confidence is rewarded, and whose confidence is punished.

Without linking marginalisation to caste, class, and religion, leadership barriers will be misunderstood as individual deficits. And when leadership barriers are misunderstood, solutions become ineffective: more training, more exposure, more confidence. But if the system continues to reward caste-class markers as competence, those interventions will not transform leadership. They will only prepare a few women to survive inside unequal institutions. Transformative leadership demands more: it would require institutions to fundamentally change the norms that are exclusionary. This is why intersectional analysis becomes necessary.

What forms does marginalisation take?

Marginalisation is not always direct or openly violent. Often, it works through everyday systems that decide who gets resources, respect, safety, and power. In workplaces and communities, marginalisation can take many forms, and it is often shaped by caste, religion, class, gender, disability, and location.

- **Salary and benefit inequality:** women and marginalised workers may be paid less, hired on weaker contracts, or denied benefits even when doing similar work.
- **Job insecurity:** Dalit, Adivasi, minority, and working-class women are more likely to be pushed into informal, temporary, or frontline roles, while stable roles remain concentrated among more privileged groups.
- **No decision-making power:** women may be responsible for results but kept out of planning, budgeting, and strategy spaces.
- **Promotion barriers:** some workers remain stuck in "field roles" for years, while others move faster into leadership positions, often influenced by caste/class networks and who is considered "leadership material."
- **Unequal access to training and exposure:** travel, workshops, donor meetings, and leadership opportunities often go to the same few people, while marginalised workers remain invisible.
- **Being unheard or ignored:** ideas shared by Dalit, minority, rural, or less formally educated women may be dismissed or treated as less credible.
- **Unequal scrutiny:** some workers face stricter monitoring and harsher feedback, and are given fewer second chances for the same mistakes.
- **Everyday disrespect:** caste- and religion-based prejudice can appear through jokes, stereotypes, food practices, tone of speaking, or informal exclusion. It makes some people feel they do not fully belong at the workplace.
- **Unsafe working conditions:** women workers face harassment risks, unsafe travel, and workplace violence, but their safety concerns are not taken seriously by institutions.
- **Exclusion by design:** workplaces may not consider disability access, care responsibilities, or rural constraints, which makes participation harder for some.

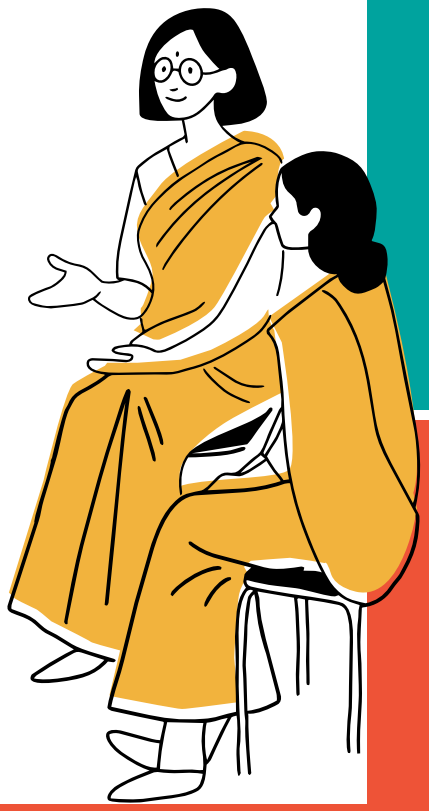
Intersectionality: Multiple and Connected Forms of Marginalisation

Marginalisation was further understood through intersectionality, which recognises that social hierarchies do not operate independently. All women do not experience marginalisation in the same way. Gender intersects with caste, religion, class, ability, language, and geography to produce layered and uneven experiences of exclusion.

A Savarna woman and a Dalit, woman occupy very different positions within the same workplace, even if they share the same job title. For instance, both might be called "programme officers," but their authority inside the organisation may still differ sharply.

This also means women do not face barriers only because they are women. They face barriers because they are women in a particular social location. For example, a Dalit woman, a Muslim woman, a rural woman, a woman with disability, or a woman with limited formal education. These positions shape not only what kinds of discrimination they face, but also the kinds of risks, restrictions, and expectations that follow them in their everyday working lives.

Importantly, intersectionality is not a ready solution or a programme technique/tool. It is a framework that clearly identifies or names the problem. Which means it helps to read how power works in society by showing that gender cannot be understood outside caste, class, community, region, and other relations of domination. So intersectionality explains that the inequality of access, opportunity and resource works through interlinked hierarchies of caste, gender, religion and ability. This also helps explain how the same workplace produces different kinds of marginalisation depending on one's location.



As Mary E. John argues, intersectionality "provides us the tool needed to accurately state the problem" (John, 2015). And it is not simply about identifying multiple identities; it is about recognising the structural basis of inequality, how oppression is produced through overlapping social arrangements. (John, 2015). In other words, intersectionality acts like a lens that reveals that what looks like a "gender problem" is often not only gender. It is gender shaped and intensified through caste, religion, class, language, geography, and ability.

In this way, intersectionality can measure how deep inequality manifests itself differently without being a superficial framework to "manage diversity." It can sharpen the programme's understanding of leadership barriers, showing that the obstacles women face are shaped not only by gender, but by the combined effects of caste, religion, class, ability, language, and location.

In many offices, there is no rule that says caste decides who serves tea or clears plates. Yet the pattern repeats: field staff or "support staff", often Dalit/Adivasi or working-class and often women, are expected to bring tea, wash cups, or clean after meetings, while others remain seated and continue discussions. No one says this is caste. It is framed as "helping out" or "that's their role." But it quietly recreates caste logic inside a professional space that some bodies are positioned as service and some as decision-making.

In shared lunch spaces, caste can operate through food without being spoken. Someone makes a disgusted face at another's lunch, jokes about "smell," or refuses to share utensils. A Dalit colleague may quietly avoid eating in common spaces after such incidents. It looks minor. But it creates a deep message: your body, your food, your habits are not welcome here. This is caste as everyday violence.

Imagine an NGO running a leadership programme for women field workers. All women are given the same training. But during sessions, some women continue to remain silent or speak less even after being asked by the facilitator. If we treat this only as a gender issue, we might say: "women are not confident enough" or "women need more speaking skills."

Intersectionality helps identify what is actually happening. For instance, a Dalit woman may hesitate to speak because in similar spaces she has repeatedly seen her knowledge ignored. A Muslim woman may avoid certain spaces because her belonging is fragile or she senses she is constantly made to prove her faith is not a problem unlike the participants from other religions. A woman with disability may appear "less active" not because she lacks leadership potential, but because the session assumes able-bodied participation: long hours without breaks.

Here, intersectionality doesn't "solve" anything by itself. It helps us see the real structure of the barrier. Not just that women are excluded, but that different women are excluded differently, and that the session itself may be reproducing caste, community prejudice, language privilege, and able-bodied norms.

This changes the diagnosis from "women need confidence" to "the session rewards certain identities and styles of expression by the participants." That is what makes intersectionality a powerful marker: it reveals the deeper problem, how voice, legitimacy, safety, and recognition distribute unequally even among women.

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Building Block No. 4

Women as Workers, their World of Work and Rights of Women Workers

In many interventions whether it is leadership building programmes, or capacity strengthening interventions, women especially grassroots women are often addressed first through their gender identity, mothers, wives, daughters, caregivers. And rightly so, because this is the most immediate and socially enforced way in which patriarchy is lived in everyday life. This is not an assumption; it is visible in the way women use their time.

In Chingaari, through the building block on women as workers, we articulated that, the chingaari fellows are also workers. This simple shift opened a space for the lived realities of these women, especially the"community mobilisers," "frontline staff," or "grassroot workers", not just as "women" but also as "workers. **This shift is a conscious decision to articulate that the workplace is not merely as a social space where gender discrimination happens, but as a labour space where rights are negotiated, denied, extracted, or withheld."**

This shift reveals that what is commonly understood as "gendered experience" at work is very often also a labour question. For instance, long working hours without compensation, unpaid overtime, unrealistic targets, delayed payments, lack of leave, being sent alone into unsafe spaces, being expected to absorb community anger without institutional backing, are not only the "hardships" of women's work. They are symptoms of a structure where women's labour is treated as endlessly stretchable and replaceable. When fellows were seen only as workers, these realities could be re-named as what they actually are: workplace violations, denial of entitlements, and the normalisation of insecure work.

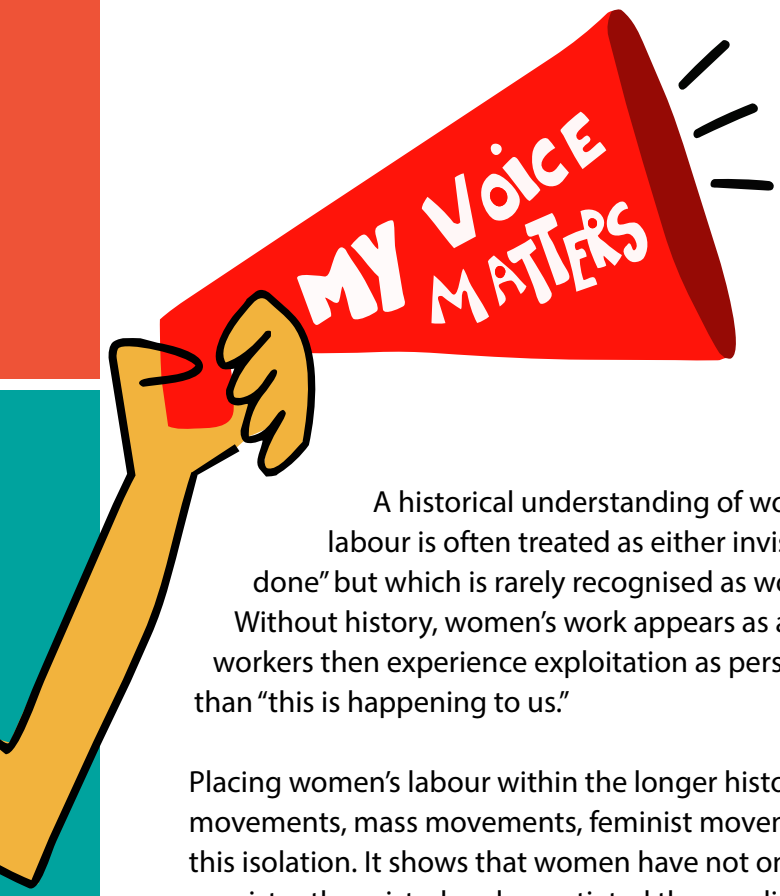
This is a critical shift because patriarchy survives by extracting women's labour. This extraction begins at home. Their reproductive labour, i.e, cooking, cleaning, childcare, elder care, emotional support, daily household management, is treated not as work but as "duty," and "responsibility." For instance, caring is not treated as labour but as love. Because women are not named as workers at home, their work does not generate entitlements: there is no contract, no working hours, no leave, no safety, no social security, and no accountability for exploitation.

Even workplaces reproduce the same social structure. Women are present in workplaces, but their labour is still treated as secondary, adjustable, and infinitely flexible because the system assumes their primary responsibility is elsewhere. Even in paid roles, women's work is often framed as service, sacrifice, or community duty rather than as labour deserving protection and entitlements. This is why work places produce work arrangements that make women responsible but keeps them away from decision makers, visible but without protection. It draws on the same logic used at home that women's labour is essential, but women do not deserve rights for it. Women's worker identity remains fragile.

This building block was chosen for the fellows to locate themselves not only within gendered experiences under patriarchy, but also within the wider power structure of work and labour - how jobs are organised, how wages and benefits are decided, whose work is valued, and why some workers remain invisible and unprotected. Without explicitly restoring women's identity as "workers" any leadership programmes risk leaving the main structure of patriarchy untouched: women may gain voice and visibility while remaining trapped in time poverty, double burden, low bargaining power and unsafe working conditions.

Did you know that one of India's earliest legal commitments to women's labour rights began with a simple but radical idea: women and men must be paid equally for the same work?

The Equal Remuneration Act, 1976 was introduced at a time when women's paid work was widely treated as "supplementary income" and therefore easier to underpay. This Act made it illegal to pay women less than men for "same work or work of a similar nature," and it also prohibited discrimination in recruitment and service conditions for such work. In other words, it did not only speak about wages, it challenged the broader workplace assumption that women workers can be hired on worse terms because they are women. The Act created a legal basis for women workers to say: my labour has equal value, not as an emotional claim, but as a right. It also compelled employers to treat wage discrimination as a violation, not a "normal practice." For feminist leadership, this law matters because it marks a crucial shift. It recognises women not only as vulnerable subjects needing protection, but as workers whose labour generates entitlement. And it sets the ground for a deeper feminist question that still shapes women's lives today: if women's work is equal, why is women's labour so often treated as cheap, flexible, or expendable?



A Historical and Political Understanding of Women as Workers

A historical understanding of women as workers was essential because women's labour is often treated as either invisible or incidental, something women have "always done" but which is rarely recognised as work, and even more rarely recognised as political. Without history, women's work appears as an individual struggle and private burden. Women workers then experience exploitation as personal misfortune: "this is happening to me" rather than "this is happening to us."

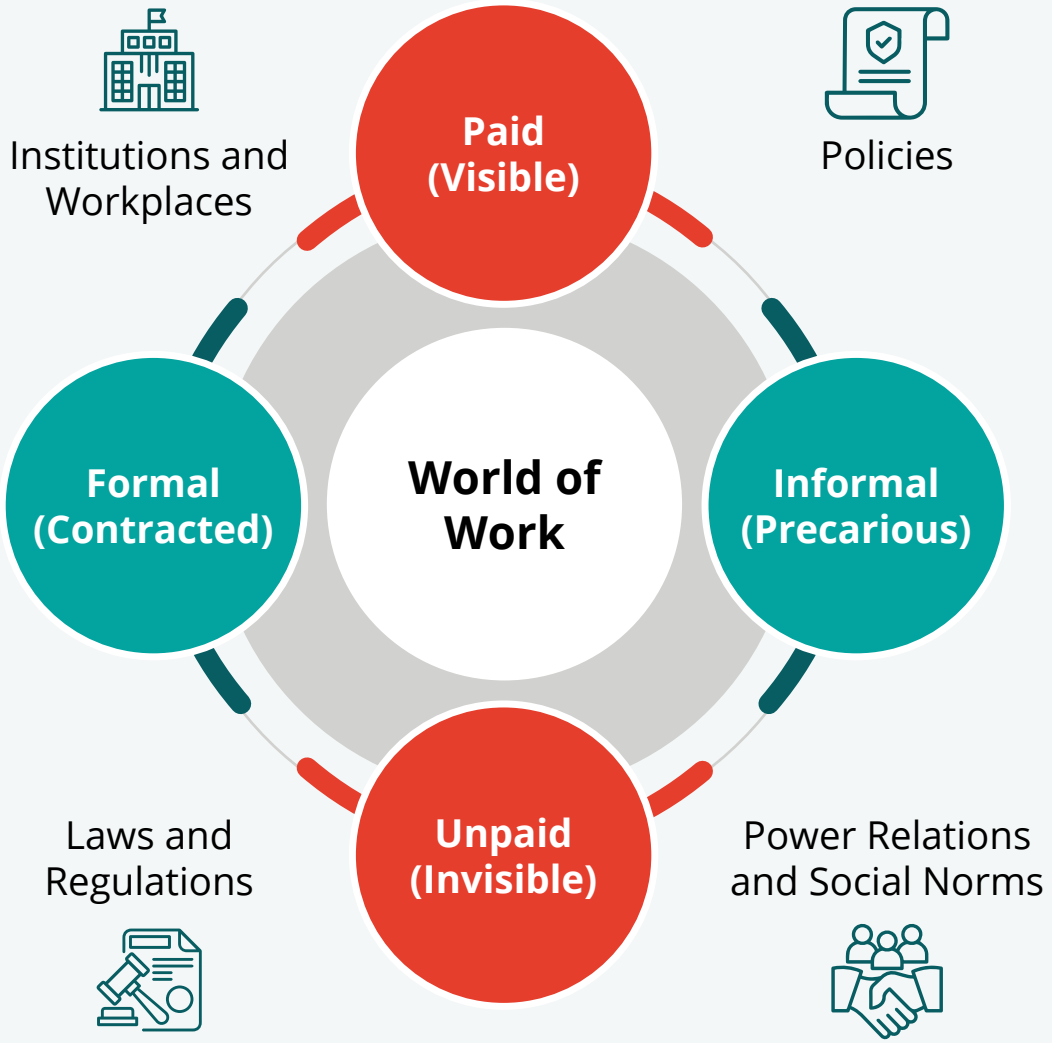
Placing women's labour within the longer history of women's participation in nationalist movements, mass movements, feminist movements, and informal sector organising helps break this isolation. It shows that women have not only worked across generations, but have also consistently resisted and negotiated the conditions of their work often without being formally acknowledged as workers, citizens, or leaders. This history is therefore not supplementary context; it is foundational to feminist leadership. It gives recognition to women's labour as labour and to women's resistance as political action.

This is especially important for grassroots women because their work is frequently positioned as "service" rather than labour, and their organising is often described as "helping" rather than political struggle. When women workers are connected to this history, they are able to see their everyday negotiations around pay, safety, dignity, workload, harassment, and discrimination not as private complaints but as part of a collective fight for rights. In this sense, the historical lens builds something crucial for leadership: a shift from isolation to lineage, and from individual endurance to collective entitlement.

The "World of Work": Expanding what Counts as Workplace

Expanding the idea of the workplace through the ILO-inspired framing of the "world of work" was important because for grassroots women workers, the workplace is rarely a single, bounded site. If the workplace is understood only as an office or institution, then much of what women experience as work-related inequality becomes invisible.

The "world of work" framing shifts the lens from workplace as a physical location to workplace as a system. It includes the labour arrangement, institutional rules, reporting hierarchies, social norms, and power relations that shape working life. This is crucial for community health and grassroots workers because their work spills across multiple spaces and relationships: communities and households where they provide services, streets and travel routes through which they move, organisational systems that track targets and discipline performance, institutional hierarchies that shape recognition, and families that continue to impose domestic expectations. Once the workplace is understood in this expanded way, oppression at work can no longer be reduced to individual behaviour or isolated incidents. It becomes visible as structural, produced by how work is designed, how risk is distributed, and how protections are selectively granted or withheld.



ILO's Understanding of the "World of Work"

The International Labour Organization (ILO) uses the term "world of work" to describe more than just a workplace or a job. It refers to the full environment in which work happens, including employment relationships, working conditions, wages, social protection, rights at work, occupational safety, informal and formal labour, unpaid care work, migration, discrimination, and access to justice.

According to the ILO, the world of work includes:

- **All forms of work -** formal, informal, paid, unpaid, contractual, self-employed, and domestic work.
- **Conditions of employment -** wages, working hours, job security, contracts, and benefits.
- **Workplace rights and protections -** freedom from discrimination, violence, harassment, and unsafe conditions.
- **Social protection systems -** maternity protection, health insurance, pensions, unemployment benefits.
- **Power relations at work -** employer–employee relationships, collective bargaining, and the right to organise.

The ILO's Violence and Harassment Convention (C190, 2019) further expands this understanding by clarifying that the world of work includes not only offices or factories, but also:

- Places where workers are paid,
- Break rooms and sanitary facilities,
- Work-related travel,
- Employer-provided accommodation,
- Digital and online communication connected to work.

Source: International Labour Organization (2019). Violence and Harassment Convention, 2019 (No. 190). https://www.ilo.org/global/standards/subjects-covered-by-international-labour-standards/violence-and-harassment/lang--en/index.htm
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Formal vs Informal: Recognising Precariousness as a Structure

Understanding formal and informal work was essential because women's work is not informally organised by accident. Women are concentrated in informal and semi-formal arrangements because patriarchal labour markets treat women's labour as flexible, supplementary, and endlessly adjustable. Informalisation enables systems to extract essential work while withholding rights. When workers delivering critical services remain excluded from formal protections such as predictable wages, leave, grievance mechanisms, and social security, it becomes clear that informality is not simply an administrative category. It is a rights condition. Recognising this matters for feminist leadership because it disrupts a harmful narrative that insecurity is the worker's fault. Precariousness is not a personal failure or lack of merit; it is a structural design. Informal workers are not lesser workers. They are workers whose labour is essential but whose rights have been strategically denied.

Mapping work in the health system is important because inequality inside institutions is rarely only about "women versus men." It is also about how labour is ranked, distributed, and valued across caste, religion, class, and gender. When workers map who does what work, who holds authority, who is visible, and who remains invisible, the deeper structure of stratification becomes legible. It reveals caste-based concentration of devalued labour (especially sanitation and other forms of stigmatised work), hierarchical separation between "technical" work and "care/service" work even when care work sustains the system, and the unequal distribution of risk where those with the least authority are often sent into unsafe spaces, asked to travel alone, or expected to absorb community backlash without institutional backing. Seeing this stratification matters because it shifts the analysis from individual experience to collective structure. It enables women workers to locate their struggle within a system that sorts workers and distributes dignity unequally, rather than experiencing injustice as personal bad luck.

Rights-based Framework

A rights framework is essential because without rights language, women's experiences remain trapped in the register of suffering, adjustment, and endurance. Many grassroots women work within cultures where demanding rights is seen as arrogance, ingratitude, or troublemaking. This cultural disciplining is one of the strongest barriers to feminist leadership. Rights-based framing interrupts it by establishing that dignity, fair and timely wages, safe working conditions, leave, grievance redressal, social security, and non-discrimination are not favours or rewards. They are entitlements that follow from workerhood. This shift matters because feminist leadership cannot rely only on confidence or voice. It requires institutional accountability and enforceable protections. When women understand their experiences through a rights lens, they are able to move from narrating injustice to claiming what they are owed, not as individual requests but as legitimate worker demands.

Workplace Violence and Sexual Harassment

Placing workplace violence and sexual harassment at the centre of this building block is important because harassment is not only interpersonal misconduct. It is often a mechanism through which women's labour is disciplined and controlled. Harassment restricts women's mobility, weakens bargaining power, and teaches women that safety depends on silence. Naming harassment as a spectrum matters because women's vulnerability is frequently produced not only through extreme incidents but through everyday normalised behaviours that workplaces fail to recognise and address. This makes it especially dangerous for informal workers, whose employment status often makes them more replaceable and less protected. Seeing violence as structural, rather than as personal misfortune, shifts responsibility away from women and towards institutions, which are obligated to ensure safe working environments. It also reduces shame by making clear that what women face is produced by workplace design, power hierarchies, and institutional failure, not by women's actions or choices.

Leadership in precarious labour contexts cannot be separated from survival and safety. Where women's work is undervalued, informalised, and exposed to violence, leadership must include the ability to create conditions of protection not only for oneself but for others. This includes recognising unsafe work conditions, demanding institutional accountability, building collective strength, documenting violations, escalating grievances, negotiating boundaries, and standing with other women workers facing discrimination or harm. Safeguarding is therefore not an add-on skill. It is leadership practice. It makes leadership concrete by grounding it in rights, safety, and collective strategy rather than inspiration or individual aspiration.

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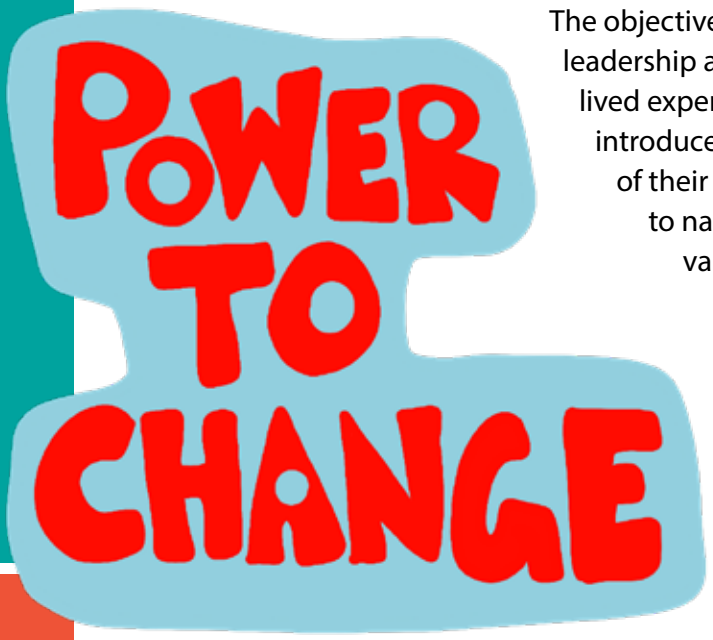
Building Block No. 5

Feminist Leadership and (as) Feminist Action

In Chingaari, the "feminist" in "feminist leadership" was approached as a set of ideas, but also as a daily practice informed by those ideas - a way of seeing and naming the injustice and its source, and shaping responses in everyday life. This meant recognising structures of oppression, i.e., brahminism, patriarchy, oppression based on religion, economic inequality, not just as distant and abstract concepts, but as something that moves through everyday life. Hierarchy created by gender, caste, class , and religion do not remain outside the workplace. They are reproduced through routine organisational practices. This means marginalisation can be experienced in daily patterns that appear normal: who speaks and who stays silent, who gets heard and who is ignored, who gets safe roles and who is sent repeatedly into unsafe or hostile situations, who is blamed when targets are not met, who receives recognition and who remains invisible, whose mistakes are forgiven and whose mistakes become proof of incompetence, and who gets proximity to decision-making versus who is kept at the frontline of labour without any authority. Injustice, in this context, included very tangible experiences such as salary inequality, insecure contracts, delayed payments, harassment, caste- and religion-based discrimination, unequal workloads, denial of leave, humiliation by supervisors, and the normalisation of women's unpaid emotional labour as "natural." "Feminist" in "feminist leadership", therefore, was introduced as a practice to name these experiences not as personal struggles, but as patterns produced through patriarchy, caste dominance, and institutional hierarchy.

This building block centred feminist action and feminist leadership as connected ideas, but not identical. Feminist action was framed as what becomes possible when feminist thinking enters everyday life: feminism becomes something we do through choices, relationships, and responses to injustice. For example, feminist action can be as concrete as a field worker refusing to blame a survivor and instead offering support with dignity; a supervisor ensuring that women staff travel in groups and at safe hours; a colleague intervening when caste-based disrespect appears in office culture; or a programme team insisting that women's unpaid care responsibilities be recognised while planning schedules and workloads. These actions may look small, but they are political because they challenge what is normalised as acceptable.

At the same time, feminist action was also understood as the struggle for material rights and security. For grassroots women workers, dignity cannot be sustained without tangible protections. Feminist action therefore also includes fighting for fair wages and salary hikes, stable and safer contracts, timely payment, leave rights, health insurance and social security, and workplace policies that actually function when a woman faces harassment, violence, or crisis. Without such safety nets, women workers remain structurally vulnerable, forced to "adjust" constantly, unable to bargain for dignity, and unable to challenge unfairness without fear of job loss. Building feminist leadership, in this sense, required connecting everyday feminist practice to the fight for rights, security, and collective bargaining power.



The objective of this building block is to introduce feminist leadership and action as something that becomes real through lived experience. Feminist action and feminist leadership were introduced as concepts that help participants make meaning of their everyday struggles and strengths: they offer language to name injustice, frameworks to understand power, and values to guide choices and collective responsibility. It was presented as something that grows through reflection, learning, and practice. So that these women begin to connect their personal experiences with wider structures of oppression and with collective possibilities for change.

What did we unpack through this building block ?

1. Feminist Leadership is What We Practise

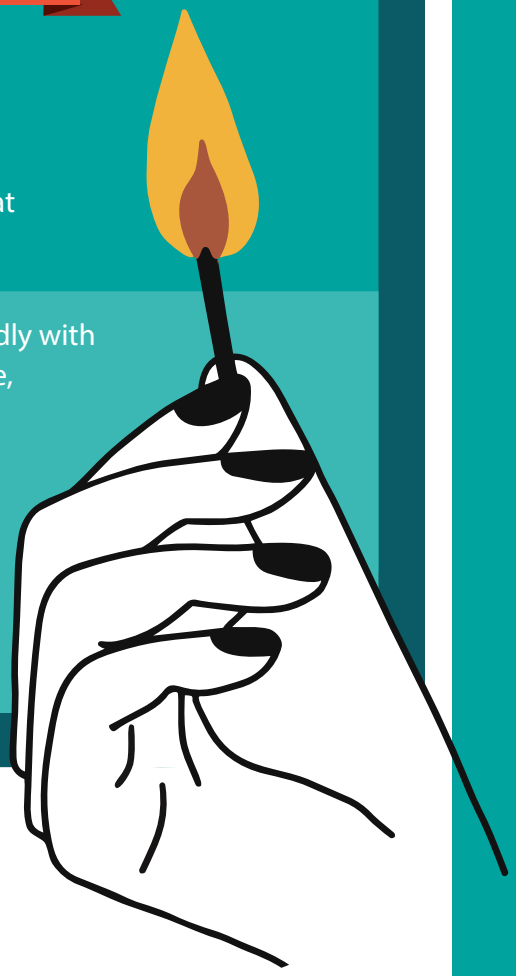
Feminist leadership becomes real not through slogans or identity, but through everyday practice. It is a way of holding the world differently. It becomes meaningful when it is treated as practice how we live, work, speak, and relate to others in conditions of inequality. Feminist practice begins when we notice power and refuse to accept harm as normal: when we take women's experiences seriously, challenge blame, insist on rights and dignity, and stand with others in solidarity. This understanding generates an important shift: feminist leadership becomes accessible. This understanding matters because it shifts feminism from being something "outside" people's lives to something that is already present in women's work. It gives recognition to women's moral courage, everyday resistance, and care labour.

Feminism is a daily practice, not a label.

Examples:

- A supervisor ensures women workers have safe toilets, water, and rest in field sites.
- A supervisor notices that only men speak in meetings with panchayat leaders and actively creates space for women workers to speak first.

One of the Chingaari fellows recounted how she had to argue repeatedly with her husband to continue her education after marriage. Despite resistance, she completed her degree through distance learning. Today, she runs a small initiative in her neighbourhood encouraging adolescent girls to stay in school and negotiate with their families for continued education. She does not always use the word "feminist," but her actions, claiming education for herself and opening that path for others, are feminist practice in motion.



2. Everyday Choices Can Challenge Injustice

Injustice survives because it becomes routine. Often, people do not openly support oppression, but they silently accept unfairness ,i.e., laughing at harmful jokes, ignoring disrespect, normalising humiliation as "discipline," or expecting women to adjust endlessly. Feminist action challenges this ordinary injustice by shifting everyday choices. It interrupts patterns that reproduce inequality, even when those patterns seem small. The difference between an equitable workplace and a grand workplace is often not grand statements, but small repeated behaviours: whether discrimination is challenged, whether women's safety is treated as serious etc. Over time, small actions build a new culture where injustice is not easily tolerated.

Daily decisions shape workplace culture and justice.

Examples:

- The team refuses to send women alone into unsafe late-night travel, even if targets suffer.

A Chingaari fellow described how she wanted to attend a district-level health boot camp that required overnight travel. Her husband resisted strongly because of the travel involved. Instead of asking her to withdraw, other women from the programme visited her home together and spoke to him about the importance of her participation. Eventually, he agreed. She attended the camp and later became one of the most confident facilitators in her block. Collective action shifted what was considered possible.

3. Dignity Needs Wages, Security, and Safety Nets

Feminist action is not only about respectful behaviour. For grassroots women workers, dignity depends on material reality: whether wages are fair, salaries come on time, contracts are stable, leave rights exist, and social security is available. When a worker's job is insecure, she cannot speak freely. When a salary is delayed, she becomes dependent on debt. When contracts are informal, harassment becomes harder to challenge. Without safety nets, women are forced to negotiate dignity daily, sometimes by silence, sometimes by compromise. Because the cost of resistance can be job loss. This is why feminist practice must include struggle for economic rights, institutional protection, and worker security. These are not "benefits." They are the conditions that make leadership possible.

Rights, entitlement and tangible security are the foundation of dignity.

Examples:

- Women demand timely salary payment and transparent wage increments.
- Staff push for stable contracts, insurance, maternity benefits.
- The organisation adopts a real travel safety protocol, not only a written policy but actually implements it

One of the Chingaari fellows reflected that although she had been working for years, she was still on a yearly renewable contract while a newer colleague with stronger English skills was offered a longer-term agreement. No one explained why. She did not raise it at the time because she feared being seen as "difficult." But she described how that insecurity changed how she behaved; she spoke less in meetings, avoided questioning workload, and constantly tried to "prove" her commitment. The absence of security shaped her voice.

4. Feminist Leadership Needs Political Clarity

Workplaces do not exist outside society. Caste and patriarchy enter organisations quietly through norms: who is trusted, who is called leadership material, who is asked to "support," who is kept invisible, and who is pushed into high-risk labour. These hierarchies are often not written anywhere, which is why they are easy to deny. Yet they can be felt clearly in daily experience: who speaks without fear, who is monitored more, whose mistakes are punished more harshly, whose presence is treated as default, and who must constantly prove belonging.

In this context, leadership is not only skills; it is also politics. A feminist leader needs clarity about how oppression works and how institutions reproduce it. Without political clarity, leadership becomes management: pushing targets, maintaining hierarchy, rewarding the already privileged, and calling it efficiency. Feminist leadership is different because it actively asks: who is left out, who is carrying risk, who is not being heard, who is being exploited, and what structures are producing this? It requires an ability to name caste power, patriarchal norms, discrimination against minorities, and exclusion of disabled workers. Political clarity also means refusing to treat injustice as neutral or inevitable. It involves holding values even when systems reward opposite values.

Feminist leadership requires structural understanding of oppression and value-driven decisions.

Examples:

- Hiring and training opportunities are redesigned to include rural and marginalised workers.
- Budgeting prioritises staff welfare and safety, not only programme visibility.

A Chingaari fellow reflected that during block-level government meetings, when she introduced herself, officials would often ask, "Who is the senior from your office?", even though she was the designated representative. Later she noticed that when her upper-caste male colleague attended the same meetings, no one asked this question. She began asserting her role more firmly and stopped deferring automatically. Over time, she realised that what she had internalised as "lack of confidence" was actually a pattern of how authority is socially read through caste and gender.

Another fellow narrated that during a review, she raised repeated safety concerns about travelling alone to remote villages. The response was, "Field work is tough; you have to adjust." Later, when targets were not met, she was told she needed to "improve time management." She described feeling trapped between risk and performance pressure.

5. Leadership is Collective, Not Individual

Feminist leadership treats leadership as collective: building shared responsibility, ensuring many women grow, distributing voice and resources, sharing information, and creating systems where leadership does not depend on one person. Collective leadership matters because it challenges the culture of scarcity: the idea that only one woman can win. It also builds sustainability: even if one leader leaves, the work continues because leadership has been distributed, not centralised.

A participant recalled that she was often praised as the "strong one" in her district. Whenever there was conflict, she was sent. Whenever there was a difficult family, she was assigned. She felt proud initially. But over time, she realised she was exhausted, and younger workers were rarely given space to try. Leadership had quietly become burden. She admitted that stepping back felt risky; if something went wrong, she would still be blamed. The pressure of being the reliable one made her question whether leadership was empowerment or overwork.


Yes! I want to try ...

Driving a Feminist Pedagogy - Holding Learning as Politics, Practice, and Possibility!

> To be a subject of history is to be able to name one's own reality.
>
> — Paulo Freire

Women do not come into learning spaces empty-handed. They arrive carrying a particular kind of silence, one that has been cultivated over years, sometimes decades, through instructions (read as rewards and punishments). It is not always the silence of shyness or the silence owing to a mere lack of 'confidence'. Often it is a silence acquired for survival. It is the silence that knows when speaking can invite backlash. The silence that is aware how quickly the room can turn. The silence that has learned to measure the cost of being wrong, or being too visible, or being too certain. Some women bring a silence that looks like politeness, but is actually protection. Some bring a silence that looks like disinterest, to mask exhaustion. Some bring a silence as resistance, a refusal to challenge. Many bring the silence of labour because their lives have been spent working, not preparing speeches about their work. And even those who speak confidently often speak with an inner watchfulness, the way one speaks while also monitoring who is listening and how they might interpret it.

46 women, working in community based organisations in tier 2 and tier 3 cities walked into the first in-person Chingaari workshop, with their professional identities along with entire social histories. Their clothes, accents, and languages carried different kinds of histories of caste, religion, experiences of privilege and oppression. Some came from villages and small towns, some from cities; some had moved easily through higher education, while others had built expertise through fieldwork and lived struggle rather than formal credentials. Some were Dalit, some Adivasi, some from OBC communities; some were from dominant castes. Some were as young as eighteen, still new to organisational life and still learning the language of institutions; others were women in their fifties, carrying decades of work, care, and compromise in their bodies. Some were Muslim women used to being read through suspicion; while the majority had a religious identity that offered the assurance that public spaces would not be sceptical of their presence. Some entered the room with bodies trained to rely on invisibility, others with bodies trained into visibility. Some were eloquent while others had learned to measure every sentence because speaking "wrong" could invite humiliation.

In the Chingaari sessions, silence was one of the first things that became visible. Silence was the first curriculum. Before any concept was explained, before any module began, before the language of gender, patriarchy and power entered the room, silence had already marked something: "learning spaces are not neutral". They inherit the world as it is. Patriarchy does not pause at the door. Caste does not wait outside. Organisational or age hierarchy does not politely retreat in a learning space. The women sitting in the room may have the same title, i.e. Chingaari fellows, but power travels into the room through them (even before we know it). It travels through fluency, through caste location, through class comfort, through city familiarity, through age, through the visible confidence or lack of it.

As a programme team, we had done what any serious capacity-building initiative does: we arrived with a prepared agenda. The sessions were designed carefully, the flow planned, the framework ready. That preparation was necessary. It is part of building learning spaces. But even before we could begin, even before the first facilitation question opened the room, silence already existed - thick, political, layered. These women did not lack knowledge; many of them know how to handle communities, hospitals, fieldwork routes, local power brokers, organisational deadlines. The silence was because the world had taught different women different costs of speaking. And while this is not unique to Chingaari, what it prodded us to confront was deeper. It forced us to ask what kind of pedagogy we were carrying into the room. Whether our methods would merely manage participation, or whether they would reckon with the structures that produce silence in the first place?

Any leadership programme that pretends learning is neutral is already failing women. This is why the question of pedagogy is important. **Because pedagogy is the architecture that decides what kind of presence is possible in a session. Pedagogy decides whether silence will be treated as failure or as truth.**

The Ethos of Feminist Pedagogy

The clever activity, the well-designed module, the smooth facilitation, the energiser that wakes everyone up, the role play that makes the point land - they are all undoubtedly useful. But they are not the centre of pedagogy. **Along with what activity facilitators do in a session, pedagogy is what we believe learning is for. It is the imagination that holds the learning space.** It is the quiet architecture that decides who will be treated as a teacher, who will be treated as a learner, what will be accepted as knowledge, and what kind of change the learning is expected to produce.

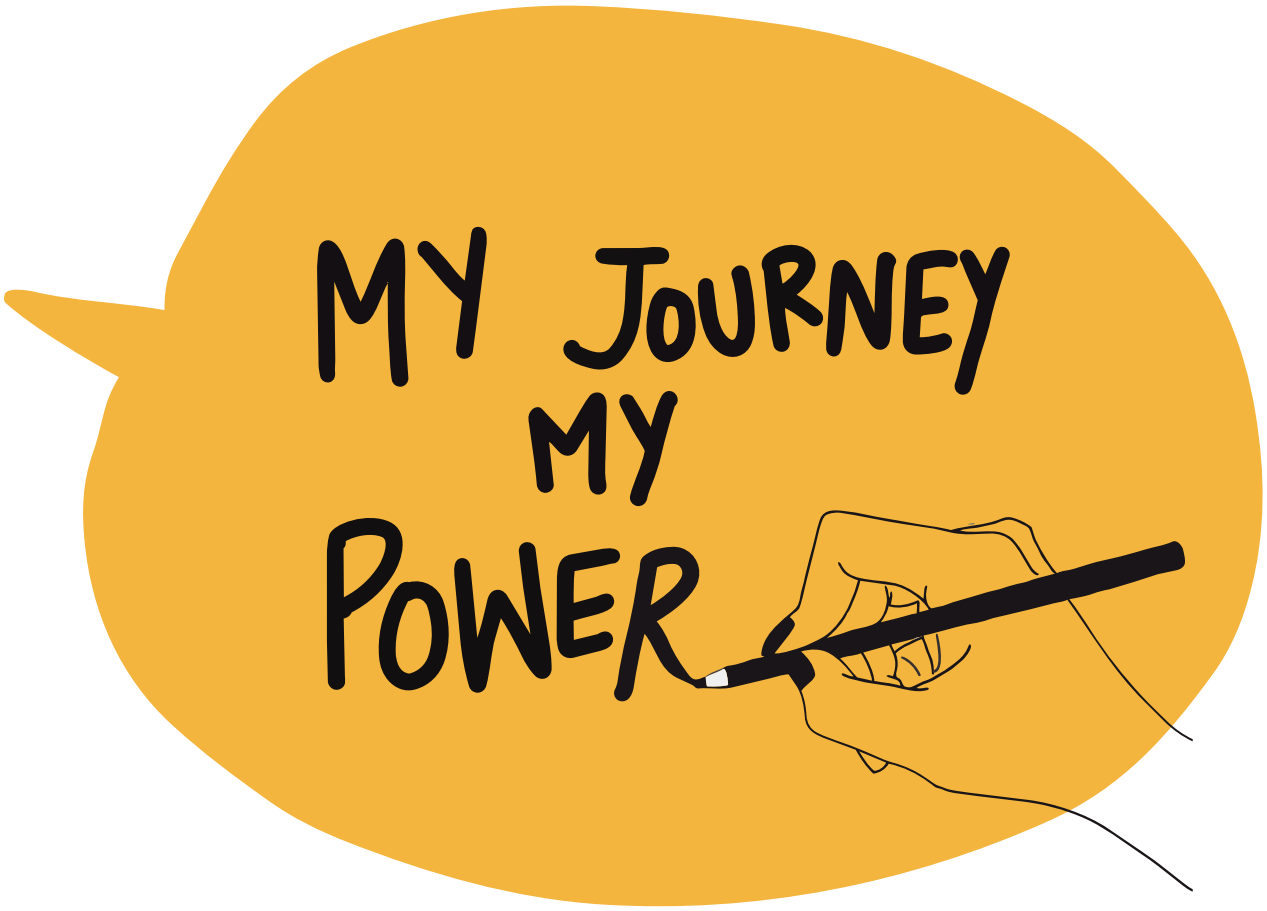
This is why speaking about pedagogy is really speaking about power. Because learning spaces are not outside the world. They are made from the world. And whatever the world carries, hierarchy, exclusion, fear, privilege, bias, often walks into the learning space, and in the case of Chingaari, into the online sessions too. Offices, Families, Communities carry hierarchy. Learning spaces too carry the same, unless they are held differently. A pedagogy that refuses to name this ends up reproducing it.

Paulo Freire warned us about this. He argued that most education functions like a "bank." Knowledge is treated as currency, and learners are treated as empty accounts. The teacher deposits information; the learner receives it quietly. This kind of learning does not liberate people.

It trains them to obey. It teaches them to accept the world as it is, rather than to question why the world is this way. Freire insisted that education should do something entirely different. It should help people learn to read the world, not only the words on a page, but the structures around them, and the structures that shape words and language themselves. It should cultivate critical consciousness: the ability to see oppression clearly, to name it, and to recognize that what appears as fate is in fact designed. And once something is understood as design, it becomes something that can be challenged. ("Pedagogy of the Oppressed," Paulo Freire, 1970/2000).

Along with new tools, Chingaari wanted women to learn a lens with which fellows look at their everyday lives and work and see the structures operating inside them: patriarchy inside the home, caste inside institutions, class inequality inside organisational culture. Because then only, women could move from living oppression as normal to recognising it as a system. Because when oppression is unnamed, women are forced to carry it privately. But when oppression is seen clearly, it becomes thinkable. It becomes discussable. It becomes political.

A feminist leadership building must cultivate critical consciousness as a leadership capacity. Not only confidence, but clarity. Not only communication skills, but the ability to locate oneself inside power and understand what is happening around them. Leadership should not be imagined as personal advancement alone. It should also be imagined as the ability to analyse the world, name injustice, and act with intention within.



What Would It Mean to "Read the World"?

Sunita is a programme coordinator. Her work is to travel across villages, support field staff, mobilise communities, and ensure that activities are running on time. Every day begins before the day has properly started.

At 6:30 am her phone rings. It is her supervisor asking why yesterday's data has not been updated. She says she will do it by noon. Ten minutes later, another call. One of her field staff says a village meeting has been disrupted by local men who are questioning why women are gathering. Sunita listens carefully, calms her down, and promises she will come. By 8:00 am, she has already had three conversations about work, but she has not yet had tea.

She leaves home quickly. She has kept food ready for the family because she does not know what time she will return. If she has children, she has already arranged a school drop-off. Before stepping out, she checks her dupatta, checks her phone battery, checks her identity card. She checks herself.

By late morning she reaches the village. The sun is harsh. The road is uneven. She walks from one hamlet to another because transport is limited. Men sit at tea stalls and watch her pass. Some comment openly. Some stare silently. One man laughs and says, "Why are you roaming like this? Doesn't anyone control you?" Another asks, "Where is your husband?" The sentence is casual. Sunita keeps walking. She knows the rules.

At the meeting, she tries to bring women together. But the environment is tense. A local leader comes and stands near the gathering. He speaks politely, but his politeness is a kind of threat. "Do your work," he says, "but don't create problems. Don't teach women too much." Sunita smiles because she has a smile so the tension does not escalate, smile so the work can continue, smile so nobody can accuse her of being disrespectful.

In the afternoon she returns to the office for a review meeting. The room is crowded. A male colleague speaks

confidently. He has not travelled anywhere today. He has not faced community backlash. He has not been followed by staring eyes. He speaks in a clean, polished language. Everyone listens. Sunita tries to explain what happened in the village, how men disrupted the meeting, how women are afraid, how one woman disclosed violence, how local power is blocking their work. But she is interrupted.

"Just give the update," someone says.
"Don't get emotional," another says.
"You always bring too many stories," someone laughs.

Later, when tea is needed, her name is called first. "You do it nicely," they say. When notes have to be taken, her notebook is pushed forward. "You write neatly," they say. When follow-up calls have to be made, she is asked to do it because "women respond better to women." When she hesitates, she is labelled "difficult." When she asserts, she is called "too aggressive." Slowly the extra work settles on her shoulders like dust.

She returns home after dark. The phone still rings. The office still expects replies. At home, nobody asks how her day went. They ask why she is late. A comment is made about her character softly, like it is a joke. She does not laugh. She does not respond. She goes to the kitchen. The second shift begins.

Over time Sunita begins to feel something heavy inside her. It is not only fatigue. It is a strange, quiet self-doubt. She starts thinking: Maybe I am not managing well. Maybe I am too sensitive. Maybe I should speak less. Maybe I should adjust more. She believes that this is just how life is.

Reflection Questions:

- In Sunita's day, what are the moments where power is operating ?
- What parts of her experience are being treated as "normal" even though they are forms of injustice?
- How does patriarchy appear here, at home, workplace and in the community?
- What kinds of labour does Sunita do that are not recognised as labour? Who benefits from this invisibility?
- If Sunita begins to "read the world" in Freire's sense, what might she start seeing differently?
- What new questions might she ask once she understands that this is not fate, but design?
- What kinds of collective support could make it possible for Sunita to resist, not alone, but with others?

What makes a Pedagogy Feminist?

A feminist pedagogy is not simply pedagogy with feminist content. It is not achieved by adding one session on gender or feminism or power. It is not achieved by using inclusive language. Feminist pedagogy is a decision about what kind of a world the learning will try to create inside the room.

It is an ethic as much as a method.

a. Lived Experience as Knowledge

"Lived experience" is made of two plain words.

Lived means something that has passed through the body. Something carried for a long time. Something that leaves a trace, on the voice, on the shoulders, on the way a woman enters a room and chooses a seat. "Lived" is what happens when we live life.

Experience means what is gathered while living. It is not only an event. It is what the event deposits inside us. A memory, a fear, a habit, a strategy. Experience is what remains after the day is over. It is the knowledge that comes from moving through life; sometimes being held by it, sometimes being pressed by it, sometimes escaping it for a moment and learning the shape of freedom.

Put together, **lived experience** becomes a kind of knowledge that does not begin in books. It begins in life. "Lived experience" means the knowledge women carry from their own lives, what they have seen, endured, enjoyed, feared, done, and survived. It means beginning from what women already know because life taught it to them. It includes what happens in homes, streets, offices, classrooms, and field sites. It also includes the small daily calculations women make to remain safe, employed, respected, or simply left alone.

Feminist pedagogy treats this knowledge seriously because firstly, their lives hold the evidence of what power looks like when it becomes routine; what it demands, what it denies, what it extracts, and what it permits. In this sense, lived experience is not only personal history. It is social

knowledge. It is a record of caste and class, of labour and mobility, of religion and respectability, of violence and endurance. Centering lived experience means treating women's words as meaningful knowledge, and treating the everyday as the starting point for political understanding. Secondly, patriarchies have always tried to make women doubt it. They have always worked hard to separate women from what they know - by calling it "personal," by calling it "emotional," by calling it "small." But women's lived experience carries the map of the world as it actually is. It shows how inequality enters homes as "tradition," how it enters workplaces as "competence," how it enters public spaces as "safety". Hence centering lived experience is a political act of beginning from the ground where women actually stand.

However, there is a temptation, in feminist spaces, to romanticise experience. To treat it as sacred and beyond critique. But feminist pedagogy does not simply "validate", an uncritical celebration of experience. Because centering lived experience does not mean turning experience into worship. It does not mean the classroom becomes a place where stories are exchanged and then kept untouched like sacred objects. It means stories are honoured enough to be examined seriously. It takes experience seriously as knowledge, but it does not stop there. It asks what experience reveals. It asks what experience hides. It asks how experience is shaped by structures such as caste, economic systems, gender binary, religion and ability.

This is exactly where feminist pedagogy disciplines the facilitators to understand and see that experience never arrives in a classroom as equal. The room may be full of women, but the world has not treated these women in the same way. Some women have accessed and traversed through social institutions with relative ease. Some others can not access or experience the benefit of social institutions with relatively less ease. Some have protection through caste, class, seniority, education, language. Some are exposed to vulnerability because their bodies, names, religions, accents, and histories are seen as impure, abnormalities or deviance. When the classroom forgets this, centering lived experience risks reproducing a new injustice. Which is the voices that are already safe (often the voices of uppercaste and able bodied) become the loudest voices. The experiences that resemble the "acceptable woman" become the most believable. And the women whose experiences do not fit into it, either fall silent again or get heard only as pain.

So centering lived experience becomes meaningful only when it carries this kind of discipline. It demands the facilitator listen to the room intently, vigilantly, and then to look deeper, beyond the surface of the story, beyond the comfort of shared pain, beyond the easy claim that "all women face the same."

Rohini Sen's feminist writing helps extend this further by reminding us that people do not exist in a learning space as only "participants." They enter as who the world has made them. What a participants carries into the room is shaped by where she stands in society, i.e, her caste, class, religion, language, region, and age, and by what her workplace has trained her to do: when to speak, when to smile, when to stay quiet, when to agree, when to soften even a truthful sentence (Sen, 2025). It is also shaped by unequal risk. So even before learning begins, the room already contains uneven ground.

Sen insists that teaching is not simply a transfer of content but a political and affective practice (Sen, 2020). In simple terms, this means learning does not only happen in the mind. It happens in the body too. It happens in what feels safe enough to say, and what feels too risky to name. It happens in who eases into the room and who stays guarded. It happens in who can speak casually and still be respected, and who must calculate every sentence because she has learned that the world does not forgive her mistakes.

This is why feminist pedagogy needs what we call an **ethics of differentiation:** a commitment to hold difference, to refuse flattening, and to solidarity without erasing inequality. Because once difference is held honestly, the classroom becomes ready to ask the harder question: whose stories have been treated as universal truth, and whose truths have been pushed out of knowledge altogether?

"When did you first experience gender?"

In the first in-person workshop, we asked a deceptively simple question: When did you first experience gender?

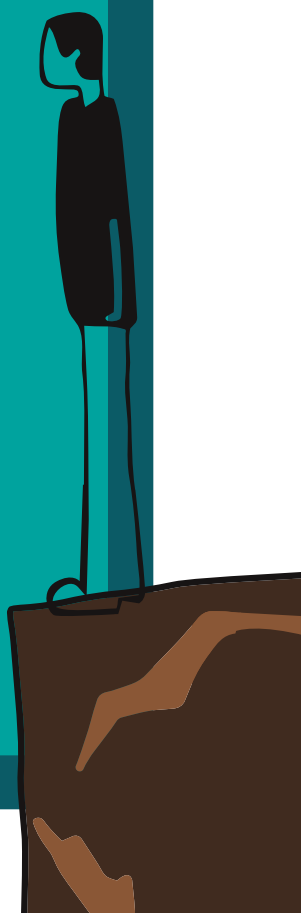
We did not ask for definitions. We asked for a memory. We invited each participant to return to an early moment, at home, in school, on the street, at a family gathering or anywhere, when they first experienced their gender. The room, already carrying silence, opened slowly. Then it opened fully. The sharing was extensive, and unexpectedly detailed. Stories surfaced of control of mobility, clothing, lack of decision making around marriage, natal family violence, unfulfilled ambitions. Stories of fear and restriction, but also of first resistance: the first time someone said no, the first time someone asked why, the first time someone realised this unequal world had rules written for their body.

As facilitators, there was a moment of restlessness, an internal tug-of-war between the clock and the room. But it became clear that this was not a detour. Staying with the vulnerability of that moment did something no introductory lecture could have achieved.

First, it established in the most embodied way that women are never a homogenous group. Even when the category "woman" creates shared experience, it does not create equal experience. The memories were not the same. The constraints did not arrive at the same age. The punishments were not distributed evenly. Some women were restricted early; some later. Some experienced gender as control, others as violence, others as ridicule, others as burden. The diversity of stories made it impossible to collapse women into one narrative.

Second, it visibilised the inequalities within the room. Caste, class, religion, language, location, and family status did not remain in the background. They surfaced through memory. Some restrictions were accompanied by material deprivation; some by moral surveillance; some by caste-based humiliation; some by communal fear; some by the pressure of respectability. Inequality did not require announcement. It was already there even amongst them.

And third, it established a crucial ethic for the space: openness. Not the openness of confession, but the openness of trust. When a facilitator asks women to begin from experience, it is not because the classroom needs warming up. It is because the programme is making an honest claim: your life is not "just personal". Your life is already political material. This is why the first question "When did you first experience gender?" changed the room in the Chingaari programme.



b. Challenging the Dominant Narrative

At its core, feminist pedagogy refuses the idea that knowledge is innocent. Knowledge has a location. Knowledge has an author. Knowledge has beneficiaries. Knowledge can uphold oppression or dismantle it.

Feminist pedagogy therefore asks:

- Whose stories have been erased from what we call knowledge?
- Whose lives have been treated as irrelevant to what is considered "serious"?
- Whose experiences have been used as data but never treated as theory?

For instance, in India, where caste has long determined whose mind and intellect is treated as legitimate, this question becomes even sharper. It is not only about who enters the classroom, but whose knowledge is allowed to become the centre of learning. Sharmila Rege insisted that the classroom must become a space where dominant knowledge is disrupted through the critical centering of Dalit women's narratives and standpoints (Rege, 2013). Her approach is not about inserting Dalit women as "examples" into mainstream theory, as if their lives are only illustrations for someone else's ideas. It is about questioning the mainstream. It asks what dominant frameworks hide, what they normalise as natural, and what they refuse to see. Rege's work also demands reflexivity from educators: an ethical and political discipline of examining how classrooms can quietly reproduce caste and gender hierarchies unless pedagogy is intentionally reworked (Rege, 2013).

Challenging the Idea of Merit

Caste often hides behind merit. It presents itself as intelligence, professionalism, and competence. It makes privilege look like "natural talent." It makes inherited access look like "hard work." In many learning spaces, this logic quietly operates: those who speak in English are assumed to be smarter; those who have degrees are assumed to be leaders; those who speak confidently are assumed to be capable; those who hesitate are assumed to lack ability. But these are not neutral indicators. They are shaped by generations of unequal access to education, language, social networks, confidence-building environments, and the everyday experience of being treated as worthy. "Merit" is often a caste-coded language. Hence it's important to ask:

- Who gets to be confident without consequence?
- Who gets the safety to speak without being punished?
- Who has been trained since childhood to claim space?

The objective here was to establish the difference between confidence and silence is not personality alone.

It is history. It is power.

Now, here is something to think and ponder more about:

In the previous chapter, power was highlighted as an essential building block of a feminist leadership programme. In Chingaari, conversations around power were not confined to a single, designated session; they were woven throughout the programme. And as this weaving unfolded, it became clearer than ever that the content of the programme is as much a pedagogical question and concern as the methods of delivery, facilitation, and space-building. When a feminist leadership programme seeks to think and learn about leadership through a lens of power, and does so with women who carry their own fraught histories of power and powerlessness, pedagogy becomes the sum total of the programme.

Even what we do not name as pedagogy is, in fact, pedagogy. From the choice of content to facilitation strategies, from homework assignments to resource persons, from the composition of the facilitation team to much more, everything is pedagogy, or about pedagogy, because each choice shapes, influences, and constructs learning within the programme. Pedagogy is present even when the programme is still at the stage of conceptualization, before any formal capacity-building has begun. By then, the programme has already started to imagine what it will recognize as learning, how that learning will unfold, what it will carry, whom it will include, and what it will stand upon.

Pedagogy, therefore, is the living force of a feminist learning programme.

Then along with what it teaches, at the core feminist pedagogy lies what it refuses to reproduce. It refuses the idea that knowledge is neutral. It refuses the false comfort of not naming power. It refuses the hierarchy where some voices are treated as intelligent and others as merely emotional. It refuses the notion that emotion must be disciplined out of learning to make learning "serious." Feminist pedagogy understands that for women, especially Dalit, Adivasi, minority, working-class women, emotion is often the first place where injustice becomes visible. Anger, hurt, discomfort, shame, confusion, these are not distractions. They are signals. They are evidence of where power is touching life.

In Chingaari, this ethos was not kept at the level of theory. It shaped how the learning space was built and held. From the beginning, it was clear that caste and class would not automatically disappear inside a feminist programme simply because the programme named itself feminist. They travelled into the room through language, confidence, organisational rank, educational background, geography, and even through who feels entitled to take time. Some fellows arrived with ease in speaking, in English terminology, in meeting-room confidence. Others arrived with a history of being spoken over, interrupted, treated as support staff and not as contributors. Some were used to their words being taken seriously. Others were used to proving, again and again, that they even deserved to be heard. And then there were some, who seemed to have given up, not because they didn't have anything to say, but because they had never been heard.

So the pedagogy had to disrupt dominant knowledge. This disruption happened in small but decisive ways.

But it is important to say something honestly: we did not always succeed. There were sessions where the plan took over. There were days when time was short, objectives were many, and the room became rushed. There were moments when facilitation moved too quickly, where the structure of the module became more powerful than the political intention of the space. There were times when some women were able to occupy the room with ease while others remained at the edge.

OH WOMANIYA ...

Feminist pedagogy does not become real because we declare it. It becomes real through continuous practice, and self-critique. The programme operated within timelines, resource constraints, session durations, and organisational expectations. Pedagogy had to work inside these constraints and sometimes those constraints won.

Challenging any dominant form of practice (like brahminism) is not a one-time intervention. It is a continuous (and back-breaking) struggle. It requires constant reworking of facilitation, constant attention to who dominates, whose voice becomes central, and how power reorganises itself even in rooms that are trying to undo it. Chingaari did not resolve these contradictions fully. But we tried to make them visible. Because once the oppressive system (patriarchy, brahminism, oppression against religious minority, ableism etc) is named inside a learning space, it cannot be unseen.

That is perhaps the closest truth about feminist pedagogy: it is not perfect. It learns, fails, repairs, and insists on trying again.

Disruption is as crucial as affirmation!

During our session on marginalization here is what unfolded:

The facilitation team was already feeling frustrated and exasperated by the online interface. We had begun the formal capacity-building with an energy-packed, and at times deeply moving, two-day residential workshop. Fifteen days after the in-person workshop, the first online session took place, followed by the second. By this point, the elation and energy of the residential experience were wearing off, and we were coming to terms with the fact that online sessions, however well designed, cannot replicate the affect or impact of being together in person. But the programme had to continue, and we had to persevere. Our perseverance, and our ingenuity, were both being tested, because the third session carried a dense agenda and ambitious intent: it focused on marginalization and intersectionality.

We were deflated and tired, yet determined to carry this agenda forward. This determination stemmed not only from what we had identified as the learning priorities before commencing the formal capacity-building, but also from what we knew of our fellows and their lived realities. At that moment, the pedagogical decision was a simple one: to hold our ground and trust our instincts. It may sound clichéd, even a little soapy. Perhaps it was. But we chose to act on what we were feeling.

The first half of the marginalization session did not land as we had imagined. The deflation and fatigue were now palpable among the facilitators, unfolding in real time. Yet the second half still had to be carried through, and so we did. We began with a performative reading of a comic on marginalization by Nirantar Trust, which narrated a story through vegetables and fruits personified as different characters. For the record, the facilitation team had rehearsed this reading beforehand, preparing ourselves to embody the various vegetable-fruit characters. And then something shifted. The comic did far more than we had anticipated.

Fellows who had largely remained silent until then, particularly within the online interface, began to speak. They shared how they saw themselves in the comic, in those vegetable-fruit characters, going so far as to name the exact character that captured their histories and experiences. And they did not merely describe these experiences. They named them, much like the Paulo Freire quote that opens this chapter. We were stunned, and once again, elated. Suddenly, pedagogy no longer felt like a burden.

Here is what we learned from this moment: pedagogy is not simply a matter of what worked and what did not, or which method is best and which is least suitable. It is about finding modes of disruption, and undertaking the infuriating, back-breaking labour required to facilitate that disruption. Sometimes this means sticking to the plan; at other times, it means abandoning the plan altogether and thinking on one's feet. Disruption does not always occur when we intend it to. The most meticulously designed sessions may fall flat, while the simplest interventions, like a comic, or facilitators choosing to become performers (and at times, even jokers), rather than only teachers or experts, can open possibilities we never anticipated.

Feminist pedagogy demands disruption. It demands that we find ways to facilitate and enable it. But it also demands time, space, and sustained labour. Disruption is not produced through magical facilitation (or leadership). It emerges when those who live with severe forms of oppression, those who have been silenced, encounter a moment in which they can name that oppression for themselves. And that, inevitably, takes time - often, a lifetime.

c) Expanding the knowledge base

"To keep your sharpness like a knife, you have to read."

~ Kranti Khode

Kranti, who joined us as an external resource person in one of the Chingaari sessions titled "Coffee with Chingaari", said it in the language of everyday survival. She is a dalit woman and also works at grassroots as a health worker in an organisation called "Jan Sahas[4]". Her sentence did not have big words. It was not a wrapped theory. It sounded simple. But it carried a very clear politics inside it. Because Kranti was not speaking about reading as a hobby, or reading as leisure. She was speaking about reading as defence, as preparation.

"Knowledge" is controlled by caste, like "Land" is controlled!

In India, knowledge has never been an equal resource. It has been regulated like property. Like land, public space and mobility. Caste and patriarchy has not only organised work and dignity. They have also organised who is allowed to know and who is forced to live experience without being recognised as a thinker.

Human Rights Watch's report ˝They Say We're Dirty˝ (2014) documents how caste discrimination works inside schools. It is important because it treats discrimination as structural, not as a few bad teachers or isolated incidents. It shows that caste decides who gets to learn with dignity, and who is forced to "earn" education by swallowing humiliation. More recent government reporting through UDISE+ indicates improvements in average dropout rates: in 2024-25, dropout declined to 2.3% at the preparatory stage, 3.5% at the middle stage, and 8.2% at the secondary stage. Yet the HRW evidence remains critical because dropout averages do not reveal whether children are learning in dignity or learning while being humiliated. The report shows how discrimination operates through routine school administration. In one government school in Sonbhadra district, Uttar Pradesh, attendance registers showed 59 tribal (Ghasiya) children enrolled, with almost all placed in the same grade irrespective of age, while 107 non-tribal children were in age-appropriate classes—segregation written into the structure of schooling itself.

This regulation shows up not only in who enters universities, but in who is protected once they enter. The death of Rohith Vemula at the University of Hyderabad revealed how knowledge spaces can become hostile environments for Dalit students, where

[4] Jan Sahas means 'People's Courage'. We are, more than a 25 year old, community-centric organization working intensively in 14000+ villages across India. It works with the most excluded social groups on safe migration and workers' protection; and prevention of sexual violence against women and children.

humiliation, isolation, and institutional power can push a student to the edge. It also shows up in what the system chooses to measure. In Parliament, the Government has stated that the NCRB does not maintain data on SC/ST student suicides "due to social discrimination." When caste harm is not officially counted, it becomes easier to treat it as an individual tragedy instead of a structural crisis.

Patriarchy also regulates knowledge through the body, safety, time, marriage and through the belief that girls' education is always conditional. This regulation begins early. National Family Health Survey data shows that 23.3% of women aged 20–24 were married before 18 (NFHS-5, 2019–21). This is not simply a statistic about marriage; it is a statistic about the interruption of learning. Early marriage reshapes mobility, pulls girls into domestic labour, and narrows the possibilities of future. Patriarchy also controls whether women can convert education into autonomy.

This is why widening the intellectual horizon becomes a feminist act. Because when a room of women workers learns new ideas, it is not only learning. It is crossing boundaries that were meant to remain closed. It is entering a space that society kept for some groups and denied to others.

At that moment, her articulation transformed "knowledge" from an abstract word to a tool with an edge. It became something you hold close because you know the world is designed to pull you down. The world exhausts women so that they cannot think beyond survival. It keeps women busy with fire-fighting for them to reach the root of the fire. Kranti's word meant acquiring knowledge to name the lived experience; the difference between being "managed" and being able to see the "management". For example, being repeatedly told, "This is how things are," and being able to respond, "This is how they have been made." It means recognising oppression or lack of rights at home or at workplace or anywhere stems from structures that can be named, challenged, and changed, without swallowing injustice as normal life.

Kranti's line opens a doorway into one of the most essential commitments of feminist pedagogy: widening the knowledge base. Knowledge does something that self-belief alone cannot do. It sharpens the gaze. It gives language to what has been lived but not yet named. In feminist pedagogy, lived experience is the starting point.

But a learning space cannot remain there. Experience alone can leave women isolated inside their own stories; each story real, heavy and carrying pain, but with no shared map of why these patterns repeat. Oppression survives through this isolation. It thrives when women think their struggle is unique. It becomes stronger when we cannot name what is happening to us. It becomes invisible with lack of the language to challenge it. Knowledge makes it possible to connect one experience to another and see the pattern underneath: the repetition, the design, the structure.

LEADERSHIP IS MY SUPERPOWER

With knowledge, a moment that once felt private begins to reveal its public meaning. A struggle that once felt like personal shame begins to look like a shared reality. The mind begins to recognise what the body has always known: this has happened before. Others have carried this burden. Others have fought it. Others have written and spoken and organised against it. And in that recognition, something shifts. The problem moves out of the individual and returns to the system where it belongs.

Knowledge, then, becomes a responsibility integral to feminist pedagogy. Not because women need to become more academic. Because It gives women words, concepts for what they have felt but could not explain. It tells women that they do not stand alone in their anger, their exhaustion, their refusal. It places their lives inside a long history of struggle and survival, inside the tradition of women who have always fought for dignity even when their names were erased. So widening the intellectual horizon is not a separate part of feminist pedagogy. It is one of its deepest expressions. Because feminist pedagogy, along with creating space for women to speak, also creates space for women to think, to think sharply and to keep that sharpness alive.

History gives women lineage!

Historicising work was essential to the pedagogy of Chingaari. In the session on work, workplace and workers' rights, the facilitators introduced the history of women workers' rights. Because:

- Oppression survives by making inequality feel ordinary by training women to accept low pay as "reality," overwork as "responsibility," "exhaustion is personal weakness", "harassment is individual bad luck" and silence as "professionalism." It persuades women that precarious work conditions are simply how employment works. Hence injustice does not remain cruelty rather it becomes routine. And slowly, it begins to feel permanent.
- Women's labour has long been called "natural duty"; care, cleaning, cooking, nurturing, supporting.When labour is naturalised, exploitation becomes invisible. When a woman's work is treated as love, sacrifice, or character, it becomes harder for her to name it as labour and harder still to demand rights.
- Similarly, women's labour is often hidden in plain sight. A community health worker walking from house to house, counselling families, following up on immunisation, making registers, reporting data; this looks like "service" to the world. It looks like "helping", "volunteering." What society and government systems calls "volunteering," can expand endlessly. But it is skilled work. And it keeps the health systems running.

History interrupts this. History changes what a room believes is normal. It does show by:

- Establishing again and again: women's work has always existed, even when it was not respected as work.
- Breaking the lie that "this is how it has always been." It shows that those rights have a history, and that exploitation is not random. It is made and maintained. When feminist pedagogy brings history into the room, it gives women a larger frame for what they already know in their bodies. They begin to see that their experiences are not isolated events. They belong to patterns that have repeated across decades and generations. And that shift is feminist because patriarchy prefers women to remain alone in their suffering. shows that what women face today:low pay, overwork, constant accountability without authority, has a longer pattern behind it.

  For instance take the examples of the following laws:

  - Maternity benefit Act, 1961. women had to fight to make the world recognise that reproduction is not "private woman's responsibility" but a social reality. Workplaces must carry responsibility for it.
  - Equal Remuneration Act, 1976. This law is proof that wage inequality was not a misunderstanding. It was a structure. And it required legal pressure to address. The demand for equal pay grew through decades of labour organising and feminist organising, because women had long been paid less for the same work and treated as secondary earners even when they were carrying households.
  - Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013. This law carries one of the clearest histories of women's struggle. It grew from women's long fight to name harassment as a workplace issue and not a personal matter. It emerged from public pressure, feminist mobilisation, legal interventions, and the insistence that safety and dignity are conditions of work. This history matters because it reinforces that workplaces do not become safe through goodwill. They become safer when women force systems to respond.

- History reminds us that women have never been only victims of work. Women have been organisers inside work. For example the women of SEWA (Self-Employed Women's Association)[5], street vendors, home-based workers, garment workers, salt pan workers who refused the idea that only factory workers are "real workers." Their struggle expanded the meaning of labour itself. They did not wait for recognition from the state or from men's unions; they built their own institutions and claimed identity as workers. This allows women to see themselves inside the category of worker, with rights, with claims, with collective strength.

[5] SEWA (Self-Employed Women's Association) is a membership-based trade union and women's movement founded in 1972 in Ahmedabad to organise self-employed/informal women workers and to secure full employment and self-reliance. SEWA describes itself as a national union of informal sector women workers and reports working across multiple trades (street vending, home-based work, garment work, agricultural labour, domestic work, salt pan work, construction, etc.). SEWA reports 3.2 million women members across the country, locating informal women workers, often excluded from formal unions as workers with collective bargaining power and political voice.SEWA's organising includes building worker-owned institutions. Shri Mahila SEWA Sahakari Bank was established through collective effort of poor self-employed women; SEWA Bank records that 4,000 women contributed share capital and the bank was registered in May 1974 as a cooperative bank. This is a landmark achievement because it created financial infrastructure owned by women workers themselves—expanding economic agency beyond wages.SEWA documents long-term organising for street vendors' rights, including mobilisations against eviction/harassment and demands for legal recognition of vending as livelihood. This advocacy contributed to a policy shift culminating in The Street Vendors (Protection of Livelihood and Regulation of Street Vending) Act, 2014, which provides for Town Vending Committees and regulation/protection of street vending.

In many institutions, women's stories are treated as anecdotes; "moving yet not serious." Women's pain is treated as emotion; "real yet not evidence." Meanwhile oppression has numbers. Budgets. Targets. Registers. Reports. This is one of the smartest tricks deployed by brahminism, patriarchy and dominant ideologies that they dismiss lived experience as personal stories while power runs through statistics.

Feminist pedagogy must challenge this imbalance. It must establish that numbers also belong to women. That evidence can be generated from women's lives, not only about women's lives. It changes what is recognised as truth. It takes diverse women's experiences of gender, caste and religion which are often dismissed as "complaints" or "feelings" and treats them as serious political material. Because institutions rarely deny oppression in loud ways. They deny it strategically by demanding proof, data, and targets. And if women's lives do not enter these systems as evidence, their realities are easier to ignore.

This is where it becomes crucial to establish that evidence does not belong only to the state, to experts, to official documents. Evidence can be produced from women's lives. Indian feminist economist Devaki Jain captures this politics with striking clarity: " a failure to measure women's economic contribution reduces them to "virtual non-entities in economic transactions". In simple terms "when you count women's work you make them visible." (Jain, 1996, p. WS47). It can be shaped into arguments that institutions cannot easily dismiss.

Why Chingaari Chose Data ?

Telling stories of inequality using data

Along with new topics, expansion of knowledge base also includes new topics. It is learning new ways of seeing. Data allows women to tell a different story, one that carries weight in policy spaces, organisational meetings, and public forums. It enables women to speak from both pain and patterns, experience and evidence. And the story shifts from isolated incidents to a larger collective reality and it is feminist pedagogy in practice.

A useful example of this is mapping the barriers and enablers to women's leadership across levels,i.e, individual, interpersonal, organisational, structural through numbers. It shows the contradiction at the heart of women's labour: women comprise 70% of the global health workforce, yet only 25% of leadership positions in the health sector globally are held by women. This is not a problem of women "lacking ambition." It is a measurable power gap. It also brings the politics of "time" into view through statistics that make invisible labour undeniable: Indian men spend 40 minutes a day on unpaid domestic work, while Indian women spend 335 minutes, a difference that explains why leadership is about who has time to lead. And it reveals that gender inequality is economic too: men earn 21% more than women in the healthcare and social work sector in India. Even access to formal work remains restricted as only 16% of women work in the formal sector in India, showing how few women enter the kinds of workplaces where leadership pipelines are built.

Of the global health workforce comprises women

70%

How many leadership positions are held by women in health sector globally

25%

How much men earn more than women in healthcare and social work sector in India

21%

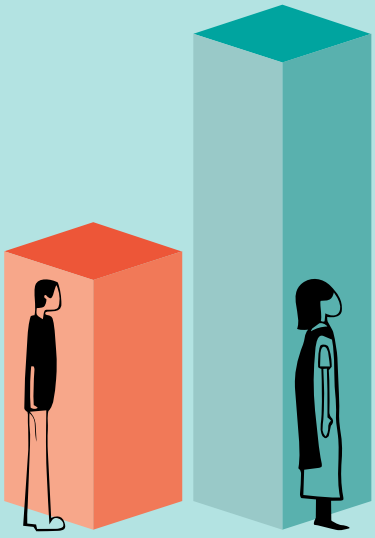
How many women work in the formal sector in India

16%

Source: WHO, LANCET, BMJ Review, Periodic Labour Force Survey, INDIA, Reuters Poll

30 mins

Time Indian men spend daily on unpaid domestic work



335 mins

Time Indian Women spent daily on unpaid domestic work

Source: National Time Use Survey

Data, then, becomes a feminist instrument. It turns women's realities into a number of minutes, percentages, gaps, contradictions that can not be brushed aside. It changes the terms of debate. It is a form of negotiating with power to respond, because power has always respected numbers more than voices. This is a core commitment of Chingaari's feminist pedagogy: women learn to use the language of evidence without surrendering the language of lived truth. They stop requesting space in the room. They enter it with a story that is structured, legible, and undeniable.

"Voices into Data, Data into Action"

Women's voices carry knowledge. Unless it is placed as evidence, institutions often treat these voices as noise. That is why feminist pedagogy needs data: it helps women carry their truth into spaces that demand proof. This approach begins from a simple principle: those who live the struggle can also produce knowledge about it ("Jiski ladai, ussi ki aguwai.")

Hence, it is essential that women turn into evidence generators. In practice, this means learning methods that translate experience into visible patterns. In the Chingaari session "Voices into Data, Data into Action," some tools were introduced in the same spirit.

Daily activity clock

A daily activity clock is a simple way to map how a woman's day is spent from early morning to night. Women draw a "clock" or timeline of their day and mark each activity (cooking, childcare, fieldwork, office work, travel, rest). It makes invisible labour visible. It can show women feel exhaustion but in a form that makes it undeniable: how many hours go to unpaid care work, how little time remains for rest, learning, or leadership.

Body mapping

Body mapping is an exercise where women draw a body outline and mark where work "sits" in the body. A body mapping exercise can show what workplaces hide: how labour leaves marks on the body pain, fatigue, stress, joy, excitement especially in care and field-based work. It helps connect work conditions to health and shows that labour leaves physical and emotional marks, even when workplaces ignore it.

Access and control matrix

This tool helps separate two things that often get confused: access and control. Women list resources (money, phone, transport, training, land, time, information) and discuss: who can use it (access), and who makes decisions about it (control). It shows how women may "have" resources but still lack power over them. An access and control matrix can reveal the hidden structure of power: resources may appear "available," but women may have no decision-making control over them.

Transect walk

A transect walk is a guided walk through the community to observe what affects people's lives such as oads, water points, health centres, toilets, markets, safety risks, transport. Participants note what they see and what it means for women. It turns scattered complaints into visible evidence about infrastructure and access barriers (like distance to PHC, unsafe routes, or lack of transport). For example: if the walk shows women cannot reach the PHC due to distance, transport barriers, or unsafe routes, the issue stops being framed as women "not coming forward." It becomes a structural failure that can be demanded and fixed through transport provision, mobile clinics, outreach schedules, or safe access planning.

Feminist Pedagogy: A Never-ending Commitment to Care

Let us return to the silence that was discussed in the beginning of this chapter. The silence that carries the weight of brahminism, patriarchy, religious oppression; the weight of being watched, corrected and judged. Through running Chingaari session after session we realised one question that any pedagogy must ask, again and again:

Can the silence shaped by oppressive power of gender, caste, religion and economic inequality be transformed into the unhurried quiet of thinking?

A silence that deliberately nurtures analysis and reflection?

Such a transformation is not possible through techniques alone. Because this silence came from a lifetime of consequences. And a silence built out of consequences cannot be shifted through a great session plan, comprehensive power point presentations, playful and interactive activities, breakout rooms or enthusiasm and encouragement alone. Along with all these, it requires a different logic that could break performances that both facilitators and participants are trained to bring into these spaces. Instead they bring in presence.

It requires care, care as an inherent condition, intentional and continuous. Hence, care sits at the heart of feminist pedagogy the way a lamp sits in a room: it changes how this silence is seen and understood. This care is not gentleness as an aesthetic. It is the work of making a room where women can become bigger than the roles they have been assigned; good girl, obedient employee, grateful beneficiary, harmless colleague. It is the labour that goes into building a learning space that asks: who has power, who pays for it, and who is asked to keep quiet so the arrangement can continue

Feminist pedagogy must offer this kind of care that understands, the personal is never only personal, and tells women their life carries knowledge. A form of care that insists their humiliation has a history and silence has a reason. A care built into the pedagogy, that reiterates again and again that women deserve language for what they live. They deserve their experiences to be listened to but they also deserve the theory, history for what they have endured. They deserve to know that their struggle has a lineage and their leadership has a political home.

Chingaari tried to build this kind of a room. We tried to build a pedagogy that changed what women felt entitled to. Bell Hooks in her book "Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom" writes, "There are times when personal experience keeps us from reaching the mountain top and so we let it go because the weight of it is too heavy. And sometimes the mountain top is difficult to reach with all our resources, factual and confessional, so we are just there, collectively grasping, feeling the limitations of knowledge, longing together, yearning for a way to reach that highest point. Even this yearning is a way to know." We wanted women to carry more than confidence. We wanted them to carry the yearning for language, analysis, history, and a sense of belonging in it. We wanted them to know: this is not only happening to you. This has happened before. Others have fought it. Others have named it. Others have survived it. And you do not have to carry it alone.

At times, we failed.

There were days when the facilitator-participants hierarchy prevailed. We moved too fast. When we thought we were "managing time," but we were actually closing a door that had just started to open.

At times, we succeeded.

There were days when the room opened like a window. When women held each other with such honesty that you could feel the air change.

And when that happens, silence does not disappear. It changes its nature. It becomes the pause where a thought takes shape. The breath before language arrives. The stillness in which possibility begins to form. It stops being a locked door and becomes a threshold. It becomes like water that has finally found a channel, no longer stagnant with fear, no longer held back behind a dam of caution, but moving. Freely. And perhaps this is the deepest promise of feminist pedagogy: not that it will make women louder, but that it will make women free thinkers. Freer to name, analyse and challenge what they experience.

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CHINGARI

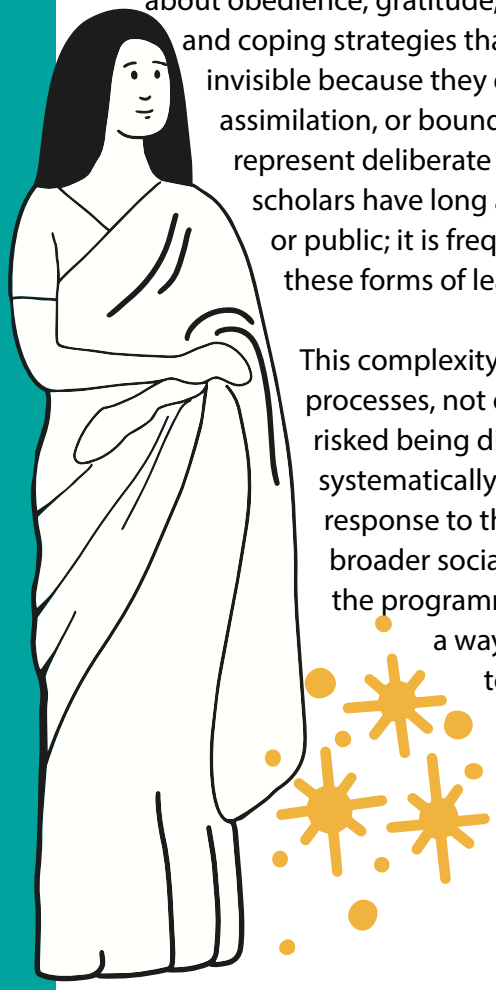
The Process within a Process: Integrating Research into a Feminist Leadership Programme

> ‘Critical’ does not mean destructive, but only willing to examine what we sometimes presuppose in our way of thinking, and that gets in the way of making a more livable world.
>
> **Judith Butler**

Leadership development programmes often leave a strong imprint on women who participate in them. Women speak about finding their voice, feeling more confident, understanding power differently, and might begin to see themselves as leaders. They also speak about feeling confused, conflicted, rattled and angry. These are meaningful shifts. Yet when such programmes conclude, a familiar set of questions surfaces. Where is the evidence? What changed beyond personal stories? Did the learning travel into workplaces, organisations, or systems?

These questions are not hostile. They are important because they ask feminist leadership work to be accountable, visible, and credible beyond personal transformation. Yet feminist leadership rarely produces quick or tidy outcomes. Chingaari began with the understanding that leadership is shaped by gender, caste, class, work arrangements, and the everyday constraints women navigate at home and at work. Leadership, in this sense, is not a neutral skill set that can be acquired in isolation. It is relational, negotiated, and deeply embedded in context. Feminist leadership therefore unfolds unevenly. Change does not move in straight lines or predictable timelines. Some shifts take root internally first, altering how women see themselves, their work, and their limits, long before these shifts become visible in action or recognition.

At times, these changes create discomfort rather than confidence. Challenging hierarchy and authority often means confronting not only external power structures, but also internalised beliefs about obedience, gratitude, and self-worth. Feminist leadership can unsettle long-held perceptions and coping strategies that once made survival possible. Other forms of change remain largely invisible because they do not resemble conventional leadership expressions. Refusal, silence, assimilation, or boundary-setting may not look like leadership from the outside, yet they often represent deliberate and political choices made in constrained environments. As feminist scholars have long argued, women's agency does not always appear as resistance that is loud or public; it is frequently quiet, strategic, and shaped by risk (Kabeer, 1999). Recognising these forms of leadership requires ways of seeing that go beyond surface outcomes.



This complexity posed a clear challenge for Chingaari. Evidence had to capture processes, not only results. At the same time, relying solely on individual narratives risked being dismissed as anecdotal and limited the programme's ability to learn systematically and evolve. Feminist research methodology offers an important response to this tension by valuing lived experience while also placing it within broader social and structural analysis. This is why Chingaari treated research as part of the programme itself, rather than as an activity added at the end. Research became a way to trace change over time, to hold contradiction and unevenness, and to strengthen the programme's capacity to reflect, adapt, and deepen its feminist practice. In doing so, it aligned with a core feminist insight articulated by scholars such as Donna Haraway: that situated knowledge, when systematically engaged, can produce both political clarity and credible evidence without flattening complexity.

Research as Feminist Practice, Not an Add-On

As a research organisation, ICRW works with a clear principle: evidence should inform policy, strengthen programmes, and guide the use of scarce resources in ways that protect dignity and improve lives. This principle shaped the decision to integrate research into Chingaari from the start. Research was not positioned as an external judgement. It was embedded as a learning practice.

Integrating research helped the programme do three things simultaneously:

- Generate credible evidence of change
- Improve the programme while it was ongoing
- Document how feminist meaning-making emerges in a collective leadership space

The baseline assessment, pre and post shifts, reflection workshops, and in-depth interviews were not treated as separate research products. Together, they formed a feedback loop. Evidence shaped learning, and learning reshaped evidence. This made the programme more grounded, responsive, and politically honest.

Feminist Research Orientation

Feminist research does not claim neutrality. It starts from lived experience, especially the experiences of those at the margins. It values reflexivity, participation, and accountability. As Sandra Harding argues, feminist research asks not only what we know, but whose knowledge counts, and how it is produced.

Holding Complexity in Leadership Learning

Many leadership programmes focus primarily on the individual. They measure confidence, communication skills, or self-efficacy. Feminist leadership demands more. It asks questions about workplace culture, informal power, safety, discrimination, backlash, and unequal access to opportunity. These realities cannot be captured through simple indicators.

Research helped Chingaari hold this complexity. It allowed the programme to be seen as a living process rather than a fixed curriculum. Feminist learning is rarely linear. It unfolds through tension, resistance, discomfort, and moments of clarity. It can be tiring and at times, exasperating and frustrating. Awareness often increases frustration before it creates relief, because inequality becomes harder to ignore once it is named.

Without research, such shifts are easy to miss. With research, the programme could make learning visible, rather than only anecdotal. It could track how women's thinking evolved around power, privilege, rights, discrimination, inclusion and exclusion, and leadership in unequal workplaces. This showed that the programme did more than motivate women. It built critical consciousness.

As Paulo Freire reminds us, critical awareness is not about information alone. It is about developing the ability to read the world, not just the word.

From Knowledge Transfer to Knowledge-Making

Research did more than strengthen the learning culture of Chingaari. It subtly but decisively shifted what feminist leadership itself came to mean within the programme. Through regular cycles of reflection and feedback, learning was treated as ongoing rather than as a one-time intervention. Women were encouraged to link personal experience with structural explanation, but in doing so, they also began to question inherited ideas of leadership.

Feminist leadership was no longer held only as a value or an aspirational goal, as it often appears in broader discourse. Instead, it became something lived, negotiated, and redefined through everyday practice. This distinction mattered. The experience of engaging with feminist leadership in a learning space revealed how different it is from how it is imagined in policy language, organisational vision statements, or training manuals.

Integrating research into the programme allowed these shifts in meaning, scope, and contour to surface. Feminist leadership, when examined closely, did not always look confident, visible, or transformative in conventional ways. It appeared as hesitation, contradiction, fatigue, strategic silence, or careful compliance. Research created space to challenge canonical knowledge about feminist leadership that tends to privilege visibility, voice, and assertion.

By asking women not only to share stories but to analyse them, reflection workshops and interviews encouraged a critical examination of what is often taken for granted. Women began to recognise that locating inequality only within themselves leaves patriarchal systems untouched, while naming norms, workplace cultures, and policy frameworks makes leadership political rather than personal. In this way, research expanded feminist leadership beyond skill-building and self-improvement, repositioning it as a collective and contested practice.

This shift marked a movement from knowledge transfer to knowledge-making. Women were not simply absorbing feminist concepts; they were reshaping them. Their lived realities complicated neat definitions and exposed the gaps between feminist leadership as an ideal and feminist leadership as it is practised under constraint. The baseline and endline assessments captured starting points and changes over time, but their deeper value lay in legitimising complexity as part of learning rather than treating it as confusion or resistance. Feminist leadership was allowed to remain layered, relational, and unfinished. Research made it possible to sit with this unfinished quality and to see it not as a weakness, but as an honest reflection of how leadership is forged in unequal conditions.

Why Knowledge-Making Matters?

Feminist leadership is not about receiving expert wisdom or conforming to pre-defined models. It is about producing language, analysis, and meaning from lived experience. When women generate their own interpretations of power, agency, and leadership, dominant assumptions are unsettled, and leadership becomes collective rather than individualised.


LEADERSHIP IS MY SUPERPOWER

How Research Strengthened Programme Design

Feminist leadership work cannot be rigid. It must remain responsive to women's lived realities, which are often unstable, constrained, and shaped by forces beyond individual control. Silence, fear, uneven participation, and withdrawal are therefore not failures of engagement. They are signals. Conventional monitoring and evaluation frameworks often struggle to read these signals because they are designed to look for linear progress, visible participation, and clearly attributable outcomes.

By contrast, the research approach within Chingaari was attentive to the push and pull of learning itself. It allowed the programme to see beyond what was immediately visible and to recognise that change is often expressed through hesitation, contradiction, or pause rather than clear advancement. As feminist scholar Marilyn Strathern reminds us, "what we choose to measure is already a statement about what we value." This insight guided the programme's refusal to treat complexity as noise.

Reflection workshops were central to this approach, not as routine feedback mechanisms but as feminist methods in their own right. They created protected spaces where women could speak about difficulty without fear of judgement or repercussion. These spaces surfaced barriers that are rarely captured in standard assessments, including care burdens, time poverty, emotional fatigue, organisational pressure, and the cumulative weight of navigating hostile or indifferent workplaces. Such insights do not easily fit into indicators of success or failure, yet they are critical for understanding how leadership is actually lived. Research, in this sense, expanded the purpose of evaluation. It shifted the focus from measuring outcomes to listening for meaning, from assessing performance to interpreting experience.

By enabling real-time adaptation, research strengthened programme design in tangible ways. Inclusion was not treated as a stated intention but as an ongoing practice, visible in small and often uncomfortable details: who speaks and who remains silent, who withdraws over time, who cannot attend consistently and why, who feels unsafe, judged, or unseen. Paying attention to these patterns allowed the programme to respond ethically rather than procedurally. In this way, research did not merely evaluate the programme; it actively reshaped it. This aligns with feminist critiques of impact assessment that caution against reducing social change to narrow measures of effectiveness. As Naila Kabeer argues, empowerment processes "are not linear, nor are they easily captured by before and after comparisons" (Kabeer, 1999).

This evaluatory process also helped the programme confront a difficult but necessary truth: feminist learning can initially increase burden before it brings relief. Greater awareness can sharpen discomfort, making inequality harder to tolerate without immediately offering solutions. This is why feminist leadership requires connection, solidarity, and collective space rather than individual resilience alone. Research helped ensure that participant voice continually informed programme design, preventing the work from becoming expert-driven or abstracted from lived conditions. By moving beyond neat frameworks of success and failure, the research approach allowed Chingaari to honour learning as a dynamic, contested, and deeply human process.

How Research Shaped the Team

Chingaari treated research as part of programme practice, not as an external audit. This shaped the team itself. Facilitators were not only implementers. They were learners. They reflected, questioned assumptions, and carried responsibility for political honesty.

In feminist leadership work, this matters. Leadership cannot be taught in a depoliticised way when women's realities are deeply political. Research strengthened a culture of reflection, accountability, and critical thinking within the team.

Ethical practice was central to this integration. Informed consent and confidentiality were treated not as technical requirements, but as feminist commitments. Women's workplaces are not neutral spaces. Speaking can carry risks. Participation can create exposure. Research had to be accountable to women's safety and dignity, not only to programme outcomes.

This ethical grounding deepened the team's political clarity. Feminist leadership is not only about courage. It is about structure, culture, norms, and policy.

It is about explicit and implicit discrimination.

It is about formal and informal power.

It is about creating conditions for equity, diversity, and inclusion in spaces that often reproduce exclusion.

Research helped the team see this more sharply. It strengthened their ability to hold complexity and to understand leadership as a long-term, non-linear process rather than a quick result.

Integrating research into Chingaari created a process within a process. It ensured that feminist leadership development remained accountable, reflexive, and grounded in lived experience. It allowed evidence and practice to grow together. In doing so, it honoured a core feminist insight: that transformation is slow, relational, and deeply shaped by context, but it becomes powerful when it is made visible, shared, and collectively understood.

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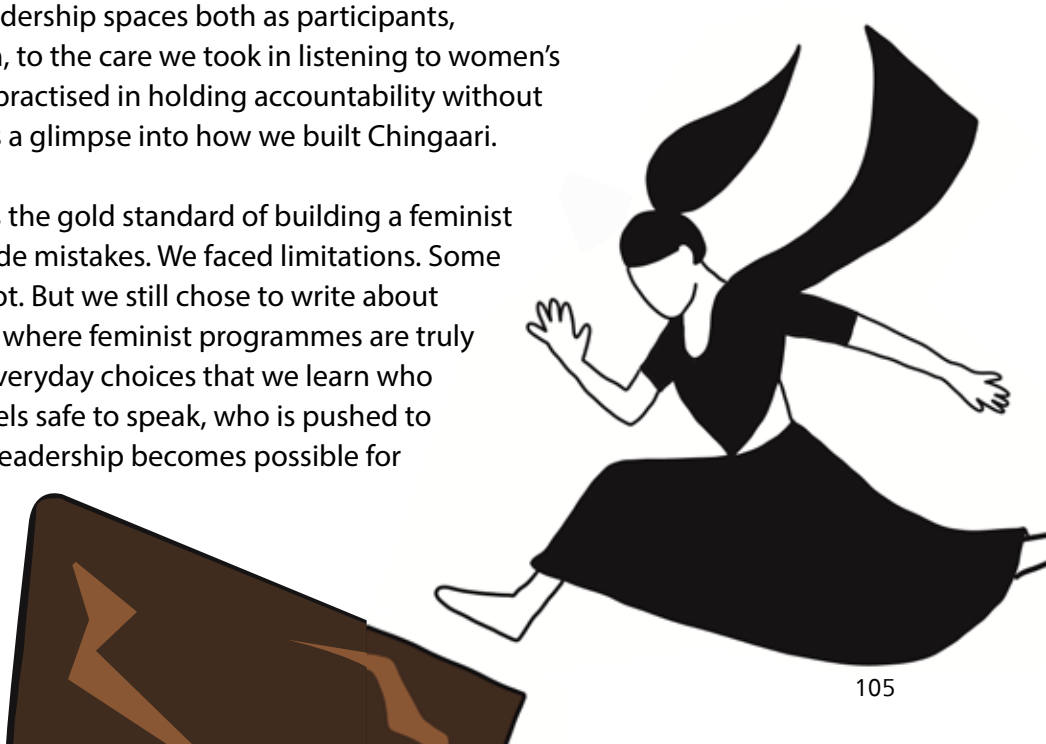
POWER
TO CHANGE, COURAGE TO LEAD

What It Takes to Run a Feminist Leadership Programme

Running a feminist leadership programme is not about designing sessions or selecting readings. It is about building conditions where women can think, speak, disagree, and learn. It is also about creating a space where participants can exercise their imagination and political agency, so they can respond to real-world inequalities not only with endurance, but with new possibilities and strategies. This is especially true for grassroots women workers, whose everyday lives are shaped by unpaid care work, workplace risk, time poverty, and unequal power. If we only write about what was taught in Chingaari, we miss what actually made the programme possible.

This chapter therefore focuses on the essential work of programming. It documents the processes that hold the programme together, shape participation, and make learning real. It is written for readers who want to design programmes that are inclusive, accountable, and politically grounded. It also responds to a common gap in leadership writing: many programmes speak about outcomes, but very few describe what it takes to build the space that produces those outcomes. From the first question we asked ourselves about power and purpose, to the choices we made about who gets invited into leadership spaces both as participants, facilitators and resource person, to the care we took in listening to women's realities, and the discipline we practised in holding accountability without punishment, this chapter offers a glimpse into how we built Chingaari.

We do not present Chingaari as the gold standard of building a feminist leadership programme. We made mistakes. We faced limitations. Some decisions worked, others did not. But we still chose to write about these processes because this is where feminist programmes are truly made or broken. It is in these everyday choices that we learn who gets to enter the space, who feels safe to speak, who is pushed to the margins, and what kind of leadership becomes possible for grassroots women workers.



Why Writing About These Processes Matters

A feminist leadership programme is shaped by far more than its curriculum or pedagogy. Even when the conceptual framing is strong and carefully designed, what ultimately makes a programme feminist is often determined through everyday decisions that sit beneath the content. These decisions are rarely visible, yet they are decisive. Who is able to enter the programme, who is unintentionally excluded, and whose realities remain outside the learning space matter as much as what is taught within it. Inclusion, in this sense, is not an abstract principle. It is produced through concrete choices that shape access, participation, and belonging.

A programme is also defined by how deeply it understands what participants actually need. These needs extend well beyond learning objectives or learning needs. They include access, safety, timing, language, and accommodation. They also include the less visible pressures created by unpaid care work, workplace surveillance, job insecurity, and emotional exhaustion. When these realities are not recognised early, participation becomes uneven. Some women begin to withdraw, others remain silent, and the learning space itself can start reproducing the very exclusions the programme seeks to challenge. Feminist leadership work must therefore begin with attention to the conditions in which women are living and working, not only with the content they are expected to engage with.

Feminist leadership also does not grow only through sessions. It grows through space, connection, and continuity. It grows through trust, safety, and a sense of belonging. These are what allow women to keep returning, even when participation is costly. Many grassroots women live with precarious work conditions, long hours, family pressure, social scrutiny, and, at times, gendered violence. In such contexts, attending a leadership programme is never a neutral act. It is a choice made against fatigue and competing demands. What sustains feminist leadership spaces, therefore, is not only the strength of the content but the emotional infrastructure that holds the space together.

Writing about these processes is essential because it helps readers understand what it truly takes to build and sustain a feminist leadership programme beyond the curriculum. It allows us to show how everyday decisions shape whether a programme becomes meaningful and accessible for grassroots women workers. Strong concepts are necessary, but they cannot carry the work on their own.

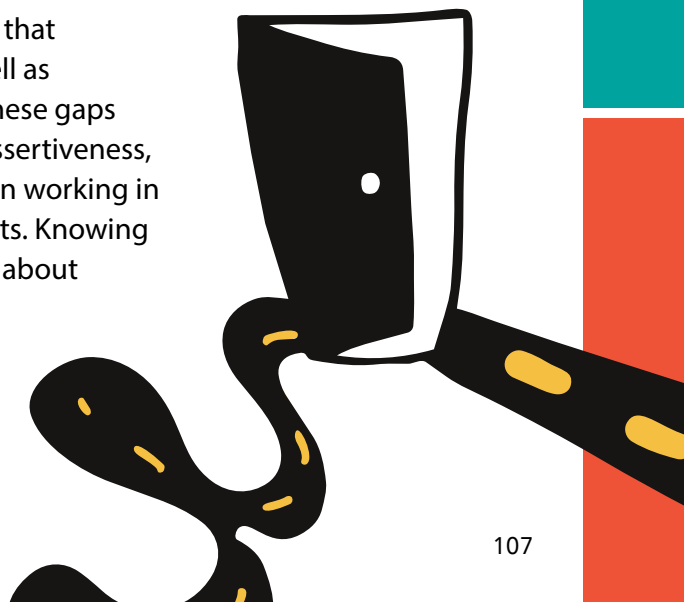
MESSAGE TO THE WORLD

A feminist leadership programme must also build the right foundations. This includes understanding the discourse it is situated within, identifying participants with care, responding to their lived needs, creating a learning community, and building forms of accountability that do not punish women for structural constraints. These are not administrative details. They are feminist practices. They determine whether leadership is nurtured as an individual performance or grows as a collective and political possibility.

Knowing the Discourse: Locating the Programme within a Larger Feminist Leadership Conversation

A programme like Chingaari needs to know what it is speaking to and what it is speaking back to. Feminist leadership does not exist in isolation. It is not a single idea or a settled definition. It has a history shaped by women's movements, labour struggles, anti-caste politics, and debates about power, representation, and justice. Over time, different strands of feminist leadership have emerged. Some focus on building individual women leaders. Some emphasise empowerment and confidence. Others centre representation, participation, or inclusion in existing systems. Each approach carries its own assumptions about what leadership looks like and who it is for.

This is why locating a programme within the broader feminist leadership discourse is not a theoretical exercise. It is a political one. Understanding the discourse helps a programme recognise that feminist leadership is contested terrain. It carries gaps as well as possibilities. For frontline and grassroots women workers, these gaps matter deeply. Leadership models that prioritise visibility, assertiveness, or upward mobility often fail to reflect the realities of women working in precarious, undervalued, and highly controlled environments. Knowing the discourse allows a programme to ask difficult questions about whose leadership is being centred, whose labour is being made visible, and whose experiences continue to remain at the margins.



The first step in programme design, therefore, is to engage with this wider conversation. This includes reviewing feminist leadership literature, existing programmes, toolkits, and curricula, particularly those working with labouring women, informal workers, and women at the intersections of caste, class, and gender. The purpose is not academic referencing or theoretical mastery. It is clarity of intent. This process helps a programme team understand what has already been tried, what has been learned, and where important silences remain. As feminist praxis reminds us, action without reflection risks reproducing the very hierarchies it seeks to dismantle.

For Chingaari, engaging with the discourse made it possible to articulate its own position more clearly. It allowed the programme to say what it was building towards and what it was consciously refusing to reproduce. It helped sharpen programme choices before content was designed. It clarified priorities and boundaries. It ensured that the programme did not borrow language uncritically or replicate models that were misaligned with women's realities. This process strengthened coherence between values, design, and practice.

Before Designing Content, Ask:

- Have we reviewed key feminist leadership debates and literature relevant to our context?
- Have we studied existing programmes and curricula working with similar groups of women?
- Have we clearly named the gap we are trying to address?
- Have we articulated what forms of leadership we do not want to reproduce?

Identifying the Participants of the Programme

A feminist leadership programme must be clear about who it is for. This is not only about eligibility. It is about politics. Who gets access to "leadership" spaces? Who is excluded? Who is repeatedly told they are not leaders? For grassroots women workers, access barriers are not only about confidence. They are about language, digital access, time, family permission, organisational support, disability access needs, and fear of backlash. Identifying participants therefore means identifying whose leadership has been historically blocked. It also means designing the programme so that the women who most need it can actually enter it.

Even when a target group is defined at the proposal stage, the application and selection process still shapes who enters the room. Many decisions that appear "administrative" are actually access decisions. The deadline length decides who has enough time to apply while managing work and care. The language of the call decides who feels invited and who feels disqualified before applying. The choice of platform, such as a Google form, decides who can complete the application without digital fatigue or support. Even the wording of form questions matters. If questions are framed in formal or corporate language, many women may struggle to recognise their own work as leadership. If the form asks for polished narratives rather than lived realities, it privileges women with more education and exposure. If the form is too long, it silently selects women who have more uninterrupted time.

This is why participant identification is not only about selecting people after applications arrive. It is also about designing an application process that does not quietly exclude the very women the programme claims to centre. The question is not only whether we have participants, but whether we have a diversity of lived realities, and whether the space can hold that diversity with dignity. This requires being intentional about whose realities must enter the room. It requires actively ensuring representation of women facing multiple layers of exclusion, including caste-based discrimination, religious marginalisation, disability, and other forms of structural disadvantage, so the cohort does not quietly reproduce the same hierarchies that feminist leadership seeks to challenge.

Identifying Participants:

- Are we centering women whose leadership is constrained by gender, caste, religion, ability, and work conditions?
- Are we including women in informal and semi-formal roles, not only formal positions?
- Are we reaching women across regions, languages, and organisational locations?
- Are we designing access so that women with disability and accommodation needs can participate with dignity?
- Are we being intentional about bringing in realities of caste and religious marginalisation into the room, not leaving them out by default?
- Are we avoiding selecting only "already confident" women, and recognising leadership beyond articulation and English fluency?

Application Design as Access Design:

- Is the deadline realistic for women managing paid work plus unpaid care work?
- Is the call written in simple, inviting language that does not intimidate or professionalise leadership?
- Is the application available in languages the target group is comfortable with?
- Is the application format accessible (short, clear, mobile-friendly, low-data)?
- Does the Google form avoid long, complex, or overly formal questions?
- Do the questions help women recognise their lived experience and work as leadership?
- Do we allow alternative modes of applying (voice note, assisted application, phone call support) for women with limited digital access?

Have we checked if the form structure and length silently filters out women with less time and support?

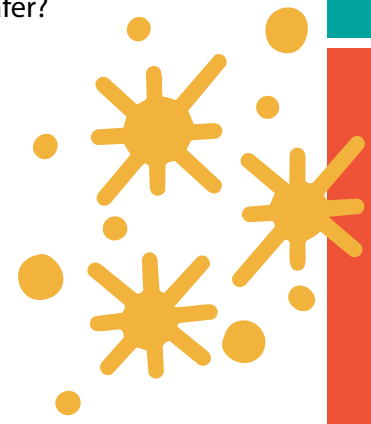
Knowing the Needs of the Participants

A feminist programme must design for real lives. Grassroots women workers carry multiple burdens. They travel for work. They face harassment. They manage family care. They often have limited private time. A needs' assessment helps the programme understand these realities before the programme begins. This should include accessibility needs such as language support, timing, travel constraints, caregiving responsibilities, disability accommodation, and digital access. Needs assessment also helps identify what women want from the programme and what they fear. This prevents avoidable exclusion later. It also helps build trust.

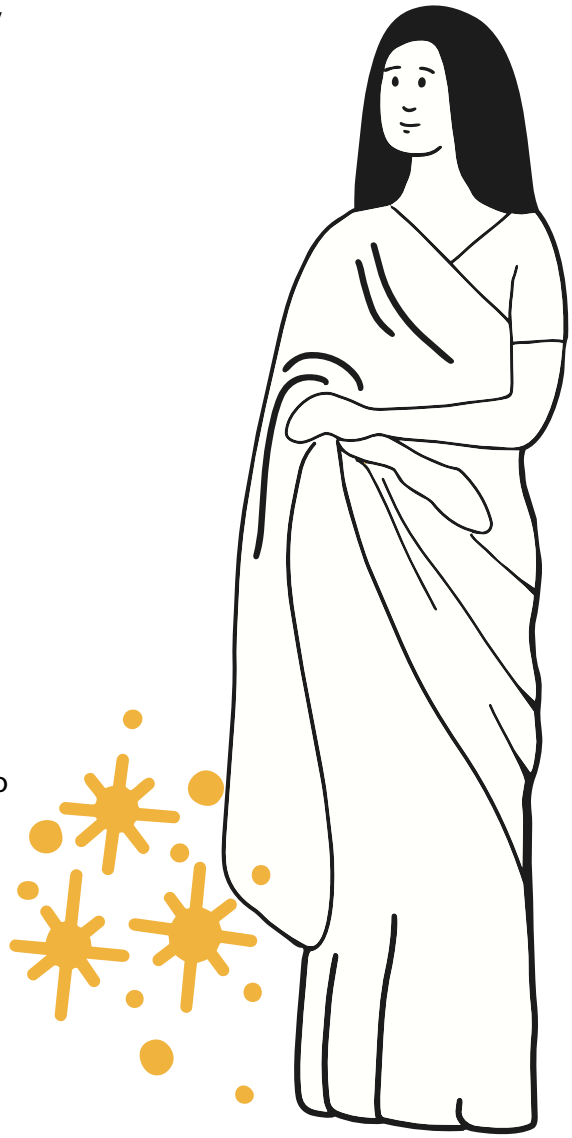
At the same time, a needs' assessment must also understand learning realities. It is important to know what participants already understand about the subject matter and what kind of language or framing feels accessible to them. This helps pitch sessions at the right level. It prevents the programme from becoming either too abstract or too basic. It also ensures that feminist concepts like power, rights, intersectionality, discrimination, and leadership are taught in ways that connect with women's lived experiences and existing knowledge.

What should a Needs' Assessment Aim to Understand:

- Who are the participants, and what key demographic details help us understand their context (age group, location, language, work role, years of experience)?
- What kind of work do they do, and what is their employment arrangement (formal, informal, contractual, volunteer/part-time)?
- Are there any social identities or lived realities that participants feel safe to share, which shape their experiences at work (for example caste, religion, disability, migration, class background)? This should always be voluntary and framed with a clear purpose.
- What is their organisational location (field staff, mobiliser, coordinator, supervisor), and what power or vulnerability comes with that role?
- Are there any risks participants anticipate if they join the programme (at home, in community, in workplace), and what safeguards would make participation safer?



- What language(s) do participants prefer, and what language are they most comfortable speaking and reading in?
- What kind of digital access do participants have (smartphone/laptop), and what device or connectivity limitations do they face?
- What timing constraints do participants have due to paid work, unpaid care work, travel, or household responsibilities?
- What safety concerns might affect participation (travel, backlash at home, workplace risk, harassment, surveillance)?
- What accommodation and accessibility needs do participants have (disability access, caregiving support, health-related needs)?
- What are participants expecting from the programme, and what fears or hesitations do they carry about joining?
- What is their existing understanding of key themes such as gender, power, rights, discrimination, and leadership?
- What formats do they feel comfortable with (reading, writing, speaking, group work, reflection), and what formats create anxiety or exclusion?



Integrating Feedbacks and reflection workshops into the process

Leadership programmes cannot wait for endline evaluation. They need continuous feedback because power operates even inside learning spaces. Some women speak more. Some remain silent. Some feel unsafe. Some get overwhelmed. Some refuse to respond.

Feedback and reflection workshops are feminist tools because they help surface what is not being said. They also stop the programme from becoming rigid. Reflection workshops build a culture where women can say what they need without fear of judgement. They also help facilitators adjust the pedagogy. This makes the programme more participatory, more responsive, and more inclusive.

But feminist feedback cannot be limited to content. It cannot only ask: "Was the session useful?" It must also ask: "How are you as a person in this space?" This is because participation is shaped not only by learning needs but by emotions, comfort, and safety. A woman may find the content valuable but still withdraw because she feels judged for her language, articulation, or her existing knowledge level. Another woman may agree with the concepts but remain silent because she fears her workplace story will be shared outside. Another may stop attending not because she is uninterested, but because the space feels too fast, too heavy, or too demanding alongside her care burdens.

Feedback therefore has to capture both learning and feelings. It has to ask about belonging, fear, confusion, fatigue, shame, excitement, and connection. It has to ask whether women feel recognised, whether they feel safe, whether they feel respected, and whether they feel the programme understands their realities. Only then can feedback truly shape the programme, protect and ensure feminist learning.

Feedback and Reflection Questions: What to Ask and Why it Matters

What to ask (questions for feedback + reflection)	Why it matters (what it reveals / helps improve)
How have you been feeling in the programme so far (energised, overwhelmed, disconnected, curious, resistant)? What is driving this feeling?	Captures emotional reality. Helps facilitators see if the space is supportive or draining. Prevents dropout being misunderstood as "lack of interest" or "lack of responsiveness."
Do you feel comfortable in the sessions as a person? What makes you feel comfortable or uncomfortable?	Feedback must include comfort and dignity, not only content. Helps identify shame, judgement, exclusion, or intimidation.
What has been most useful for you till now? What has felt least useful?	Identifies what is landing, and what is not. Helps refine curriculum and pedagogy choices without blaming participants.
Which discussions stayed with you after the session ended? Why?	Reveals deep learning, emotional resonance, and what connects to lived reality. Helps keep the programme grounded, alive and enjoyable.
What concepts felt clear, and what concepts felt too abstract or too fast?	Allows pacing, re-calibration and better examples. Protects inclusion of women with different education and knowledge levels.

When you did not speak in a session, what was the reason (language barrier, fear of judgement, not enough time to think, feeling unheard)?	Surfaces silent exclusion. Helps facilitators shift methods so the same few voices do not dominate.
Do you feel safe sharing workplace or family experiences here? If not, what makes it feel unsafe?	Helps strengthen safeguarding. Reveals risks of backlash, exposure, or confidentiality concerns.
Are there topics you avoid speaking about because of fear, shame, or risk (violence, caste discrimination, harassment, family control)? What would make it safer?	Helps the programme recognise the cost of speaking. Prevents retraumatisation. Builds safer facilitation protocols.
What makes it difficult for you to attend or participate fully (workload, care work, timing, travel, health, workplace pressure)?	Connects participation to structural burdens. Helps redesign timing and workload expectations ethically, including pre and post session work.
What would make participation easier (timing change, language support, more breaks, smaller groups, slower pacing)?	Produces actionable modification suggestions. Makes the programme flexible rather than rigid.
Do you feel the space recognises different needs of different participants?	Helps the programmes understand and address the different and changing access and accommodation needs, which can also vary/shift according to the current work load (paid and unpaid), and ecosystem of the participants.

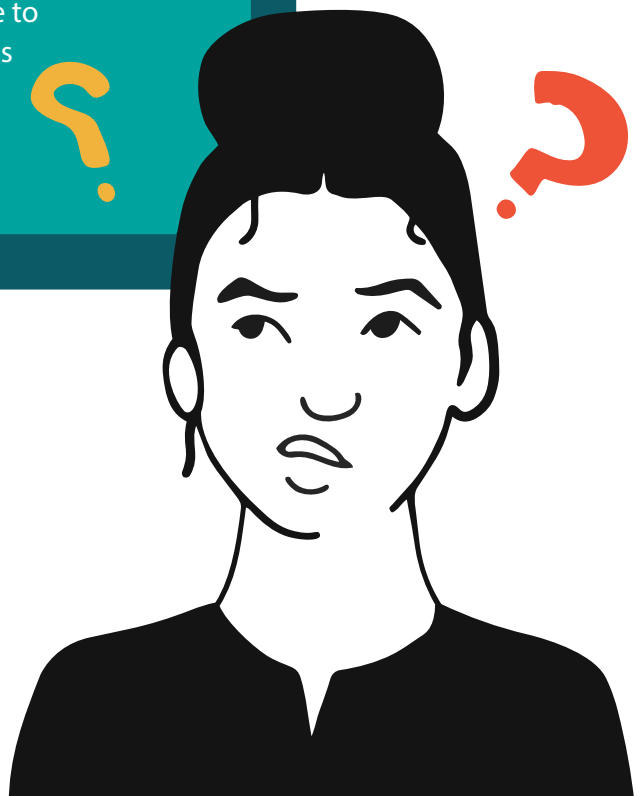
Building Space, Connection and Accountability

Leadership does not grow only in sessions or through structured learning. It grows in relationships. It grows through belonging and through the slow recognition that one is not alone. For frontline women workers, whose lives are often marked by isolation, pressure, and invisibility, this sense of connection is not a soft add on. It is a political condition for leadership to emerge. Building space, therefore, is not a logistical task. It is a core feminist process.

Everyday spaces of connection matter. A simple WhatsApp group can become a powerful site of collective life. It allows women to stay connected between sessions, to share reminders, ask questions, and offer peer support. Over time, it can also become a space of care, humour, and political conversation, where women test language, share small wins, and name injustice. At the same time, such spaces need clarity and boundaries. Without this, connection can turn into pressure, and participation can become exhausting. Feminist space-making requires attentiveness to rhythm, consent, and emotional labour, so that women are held, not drained.

Why Space is Political

Feminist praxis reminds us that spaces are never neutral. Who feels welcome, who feels safe, and who feels able to speak are shaped by power. Creating feminist spaces means actively interrupting hierarchies and cultivating trust over time (hooks, 2000).



Accountability within feminist leadership programmes must also be understood differently. Homework, reflection tasks, and practice exercises are important, but they cannot mirror institutional discipline. Women's realities are deeply unequal. Some will miss sessions or tasks because of caregiving responsibilities, illness, workplace surveillance, or violence.

Feminist accountability must therefore be collective and flexible. Its purpose is not to monitor compliance but to support commitment without turning learning into another burden. Campaign groups and collective projects play an important role here. They shift the focus from individual performance to shared action. They allow women to practise leadership together, negotiate roles, and build a sense of collective ownership over the programme.

Feminist Accountability in Practice Includes:

- Recognising unequal capacities and constraints
- Encouraging participation without punishment
- Valuing collective effort over individual perfection
- Allowing pauses, return, and re entry without shame

Facilitator accountability is equally central to this process. A feminist leadership programme cannot ask for vulnerability from participants while leaving facilitators unquestioned. Facilitators carry power, even when they are supportive and well intentioned. Feminist praxis demands that this power is exercised with care and reflexivity. Facilitators must hold themselves accountable to the values they seek to nurture. This includes listening deeply, practising non judgement, maintaining political clarity, and committing to inclusion and care. It also means paying attention to dynamics within the room.

Facilitators must notice who speaks easily and who hesitates. They must ask why certain voices dominate and others withdraw. They must actively invite quieter participants without forcing disclosure. They must remain open to critique and willing to change course when needed. As feminist scholars have long argued, leadership is not only about what is taught but how power is practised in everyday interactions (Batliwala, 2010).

Building space, connection, and accountability in this way allows leadership to grow as a collective process rather than an individual achievement. It reflects a core feminist insight that transformation is relational. For frontline women workers, leadership becomes possible not when they are asked to do more alone, but when they are held within spaces that recognise constraint, honour effort, and make room for collective strength.

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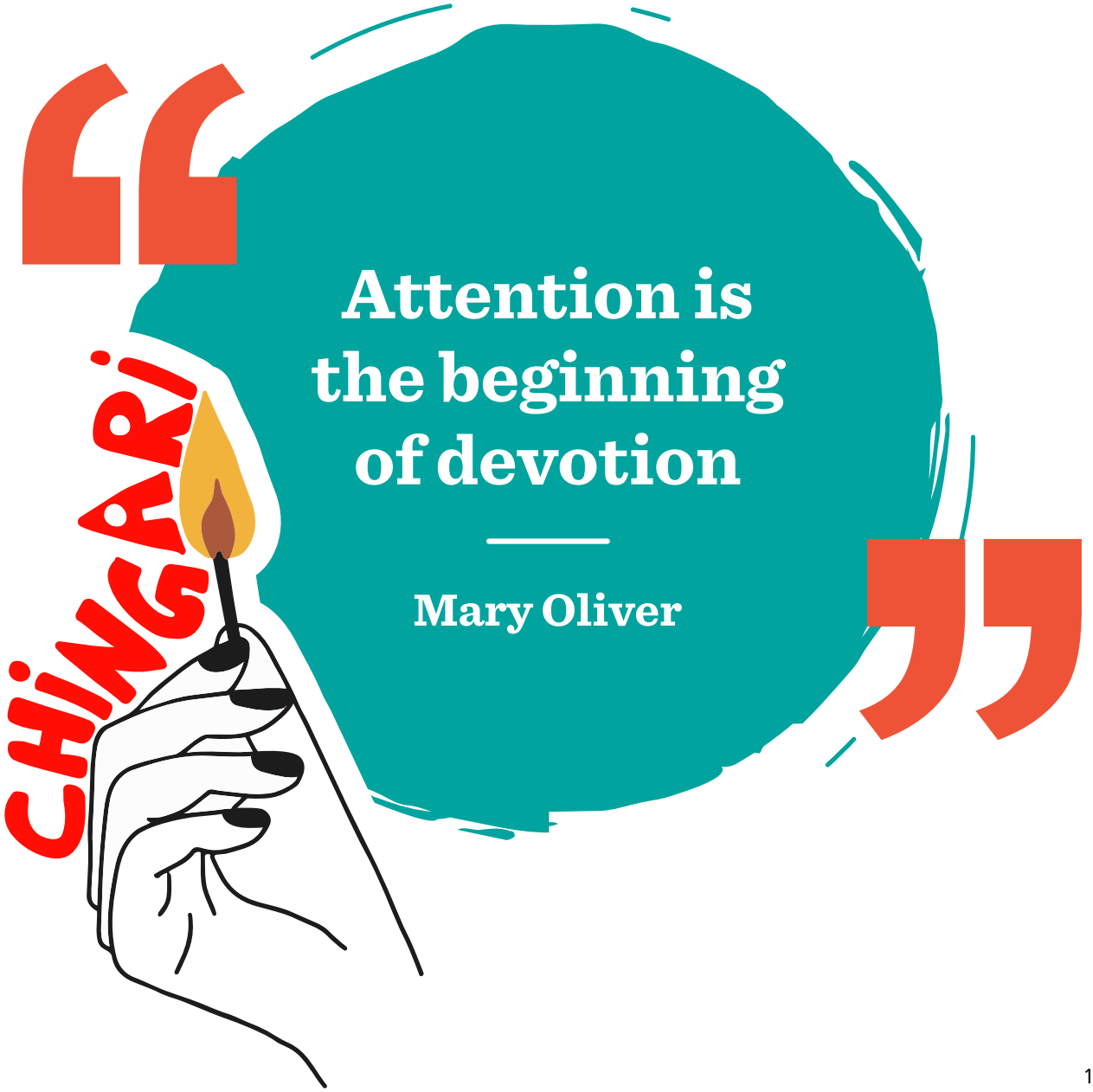
Together Stronger

Learning and Unlearnings: Reflections from the Journey



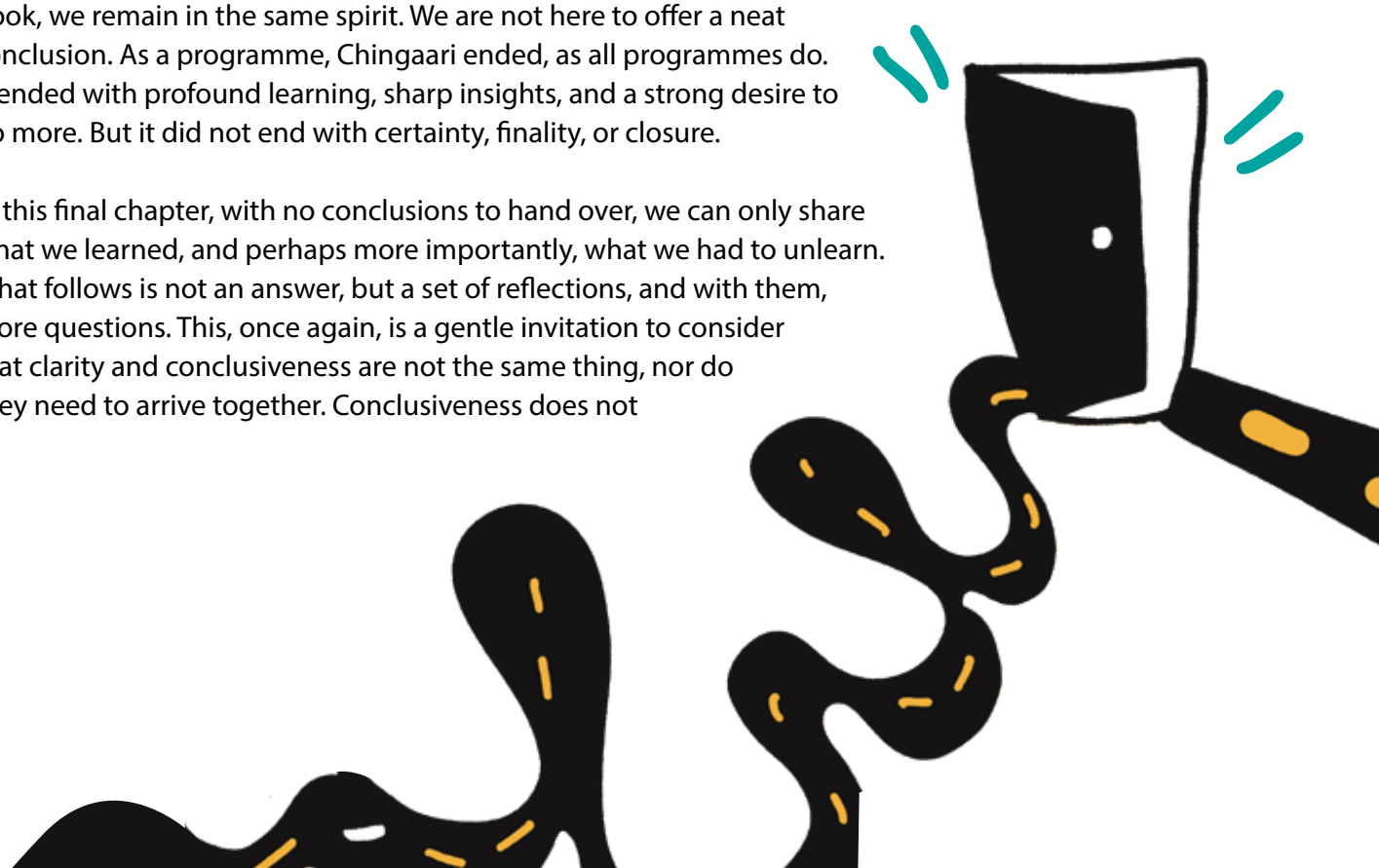
This resource book began with a question, one that anchored, animated, and sustained the entire Chingaari journey. What lies at the heart of a feminist leadership programme? As Chingaari continues to unfold in ways we cannot yet predict, it is important to name that this question was never posed in order to be fully resolved or definitively answered. It was not meant to arrive at a final destination or a fixed model.

This is not a completive process, nor can there be any finality to such a question. The journey has been intentionally generative. As this book reflects, the question opened up many pathways for reflection, practice, and learning. It produced multiple responses, and in doing so, gave rise to even more questions, questions that continue to stretch, unsettle, and deepen our understanding of feminist leadership and feminist learning. What it has offered to us, is not certainty, but a clarity of intent.

We have written this resource book in the hope that our journey might reach you and stay with you, as a companion, an ally, or a sounding board as you reflect on a similar path you are already walking or are considering taking. We hope the questions that mattered to us, the ones that propelled and unsettled us, become your questions too. Your trouble. Your anchor. Your north star. If these questions are already part of your journey, we hope you find moments of resonance here. And if you disagree with us, we hope that disagreement invites rigour, honesty, and deeper engagement, not dismissal, distance, or suspicion.

This book was never meant to tidy things up. It was meant to offer a glimpse into what we were able to generate within Chingaari, to speak our truth as we experienced it, and to offer it to you with care, intention, and detail. And so, as we come to the end of this book, we remain in the same spirit. We are not here to offer a neat conclusion. As a programme, Chingaari ended, as all programmes do. It ended with profound learning, sharp insights, and a strong desire to do more. But it did not end with certainty, finality, or closure.

In this final chapter, with no conclusions to hand over, we can only share what we learned, and perhaps more importantly, what we had to unlearn. What follows is not an answer, but a set of reflections, and with them, more questions. This, once again, is a gentle invitation to consider that clarity and conclusiveness are not the same thing, nor do they need to arrive together. Conclusiveness does not



always mean true knowing, and the absence of it does not mean the absence of wisdom. Clarity of intent, even without certainty, can still be enough to move, to act, and to stay in the work.

So here are our key reflections:

Reflection No. 1

Feminist Learning is not a Magic Wand

In all honesty, when we begin any capacity building programme, especially a feminist one, we often start with a simple hope: to change the world, or at least someone's world. And there is nothing naïve or wrong about that. In a world marked by conflict, fragmentation, inequality, and deprivation, any programme committed to challenging these realities is both necessary and justified. Within feminist learning spaces, this ambition is rarely hidden. We carry it openly. We want things to be better. We want change that lasts.

Yet, as powerful as this hope is, feminist learning cannot fill every gap. It is not a magic wand that can undo injustice with a single gesture or transform lives overnight. This does not mean we stop dreaming or abandon our vision of a more just world. It does mean acknowledging that feminist learning does not take place outside the world as it is. The tensions, pressures, and divisions we live with do not dissolve at the door of a learning space.

All of us, facilitators, participants, researchers or evaluators carry all of our worlds to this space, along with the weights of those worlds. Long before a feminist learning programme becomes part of our education or practice, society has already shaped us in deeper and more enduring ways, often across generations. Hierarchies, prejudices, and internalised beliefs do not simply disappear because we attend a series of workshops or trainings.

Recognising this reality is not a constraint. It is a necessary starting point. It allows us to be more honest about what change can look like, what is possible in the moment, and what will require time, patience, and sustained commitment.

This recognition was also followed by another recognition - the desire to change does not translate into immediate, real-time transformation. This is especially true for women from marginalized backgrounds, living and working in high-pressure environments. Open resistance or acts of defiance can carry heavy costs, including severe punishment. While such moments may later be framed as powerful stories of change or empowerment, we must ask a harder question: who pays the price for these stories?

Women leaders routinely face intense backlash in their everyday lives. They rarely get respite from work, carry relentless responsibilities at home, and endure high levels of stress and occupational risk. A feminist learning programme may encourage women to step into leadership or challenge injustice, but it remains incomplete if it does not also provide strong and sustained support systems, including material support. Without this backing, women are left to carry bold ideas and visions of transformation on their own.

Women are often acutely aware of the consequences of challenging the status quo or speaking truth to power. So even when they want to apply what they have learned, they may simply be unable to do so. Instead, they must constantly calibrate, negotiate, and strategize. This is slow, exhausting work. It takes time, sometimes years, sometimes a lifetime.

Expecting feminist learning programmes to deliver quick results or to turn women into instant, exemplary leaders is unrealistic. Change does not work that way. Such programmes must set honest expectations for themselves and resist the pull of individual-centric narratives of change and empowerment, a point we return to repeatedly in this book.

This is not to dismiss the value of individual stories. They matter. But they are not enough. These stories often erase the backstory and the afterstory, the risks taken, the costs borne, and the long aftermath that follows. In doing so, they offer only a partial and incomplete account of what feminist learning truly demands and what it actually produces.

Reflection No. 2

Space-building is an Uneven Process

We often speak about creating "safe" or "inclusive" spaces for feminist learning as if these spaces can simply be designed and delivered. In reality, space-building is not a neat or predictable process. It is uneven, emotionally demanding, and at times deeply uncomfortable. It asks much more of us than 'good' intentions or careful planning.

When people enter these spaces, they do not arrive as blank slates. As stated previously, they bring their full lives with them, their histories, fears, loyalties, ambitions, losses, and constraints. They come shaped by caste, class, religion, gender, sexuality, region, age, and work conditions. They come carrying power, but also vulnerability. These differences do not disappear because a space is labelled "feminist" or "grassroots."

One of the most persistent assumptions we encounter is that working at the grassroots automatically means shared values or a common feminist understanding. This assumption rarely holds. Even within movements committed to justice, there are disagreements, silences, hierarchies, and exclusions. People may share similar struggles and still hold conflicting beliefs. They may seek change, but fear what that change might cost them.

As a result, feminist learning spaces are often marked by tension. Conversations can be difficult. Emotions can run high. Some voices dominate, while others withdraw. Some participants test the boundaries of the space, while others remain cautious, watching closely to see what is truly allowed and what is not. These moments are not signs of failure. They are part of the work.

Holding such spaces requires patience, humility, and constant attention. It demands deep listening, not only to what is said, but also to what remains unspoken. It requires facilitators and organizers to sit with discomfort, to resist rushing toward easy consensus, and to recognise when harm has been caused, even unintentionally. This labour is often invisible, and rarely acknowledged, yet it is central to whether a space becomes meaningful or merely performative.

I STRIVE TO . . .

Space-building always unfolds within unequal power relations. Some participants can take risks more easily than others. Some can speak freely, complete assignments quickly, and respond without hesitation. Others have to weigh every word they say. Women enter these spaces carrying competing demands on their time, energy, and attention. For some, turning up consistently or completing assignments is simply not possible, even when the desire is there. This often creates frustration among participants who are always present, punctual, and responsive.

But what appears as a lack of commitment is rarely an individual failure. More often, it reflects structural constraints shaped by long histories of exclusion, precarity, and violence. Treating uneven participation as a personal shortcoming flattens these realities and places the burden of inequality on those already carrying the most weight. Expecting everyone to show up in the same way, with the same confidence, openness, and responsiveness, risks reproducing the very hierarchies and injustices these spaces are meant to challenge.

This does not mean abandoning accountability. It means holding it differently. When tensions arise, especially when participants feel antagonized by the silence or absence of others, we need to ask harder questions. Accountability must be balanced with curiosity, care, and a willingness to look beneath the surface. We need to push ourselves, and invite participants, to reflect more deeply on why presence looks different for different people. When change feels difficult to practice outside, the learning space itself can become a site to test, unlearn, and better understand these uneven realities.

Recognising the unevenness of space-building does not weaken feminist learning. It strengthens it. It reminds us that conflict is not the opposite of learning, and that care is not a soft add-on. It is a political practice, one that demands kindness, sustained effort, and the courage to sit with discomfort.

Reflection No. 3

Inclusion is Work, Not a Gesture

One of our most important learnings was about inclusion, and how easily it can be misunderstood. Inclusion is often spoken about as a value or an intention, something we signal through open invitations and inclusive language. But in practice, inclusion comes with a cost. It demands additional emotional, organisational, and relational labour. When this labour is not recognised, shared, or planned for, inclusion risks remaining shallow, more symbolic than real.

True inclusion takes time. It requires flexibility, patience, and resources. It asks us to adapt structures, timelines, and ways of working, sometimes repeatedly. Without this willingness to adjust, even the most well-intentioned efforts can fall flat. Inclusion cannot be sustained on goodwill alone. It needs conscious planning and ongoing commitment.

Inclusion is also a difficult terrain. At times, we overdo it; at others, we fall short. Finding the right balance is hard and often frustrating, and it can create tensions among those holding the programme together. Yet inclusion cannot be pursued with the expectation of praise or gratitude. It has to be done without spectacle, without being glorified. It needs to be normalised, quietly woven into processes, designs, and spaces that were never built with inclusion in mind. This work is slow, imperfect, and never complete, but it has to be done intentionally and consistently.

Another challenge we encountered was our tendency to assume the needs of the fellows. We wanted to make sure they reached the in-person workshop's venue safely, joined sessions without technical issues, received and understood assignments, and showed up for group work on time. Our aim was simple: to ensure they could fully engage, with their needs meaningfully accommodated. But in our earnestness, we might have overdone it. We assumed instead of asking. Eventually, we had to let go. No matter how much we tried, we could not control everything. This forced us to confront uncomfortable questions. Were we being patronising? Were we replacing inclusion with another form of protectionism?

We also learned the importance of not assuming availability or responsiveness. Managing our own expectations became a crucial part of facilitation. Not everyone participated visibly or consistently. Some disengaged at certain moments. Some remained quiet but attentive. Others stepped into leadership in unexpected ways. None of these responses were insignificant. Each reflected a specific context, constraint, or choice.

Learning to read these varied forms of participation with care, rather than judgment, reshaped our understanding of inclusion. It reminded us that inclusion is not about sameness or constant visibility. It is about creating conditions where different ways of being, contributing, and leading are recognised and respected. When inclusion is treated as ongoing work rather than a finished achievement, it becomes more honest, more grounded, and ultimately, more meaningful.

Reflection No. 4

Critical Thinking is both Perspective and Skill

One of the recurring burdens within feminist learning spaces is the charge that we focus too much on perspective building and too little on skill development. When we began Chingaari, we encountered this accusation early on and found ourselves trying to respond to it, and at times, trying to escape it. The concern is not entirely unfounded. A strong perspective does not automatically translate into the ability to act on the ground.

Yet feminist leadership and feminist learning are not oriented toward completion or mastery. They are not driven by the promise of a final answer or a perfected model. They are shaped by time, place, and lived reality. There is no universal template. As we returned repeatedly to the supposed divide between perspective and skill, it became clear that this binary is misleading, especially when viewed from the lives of grassroots women workers whose daily negotiations with power leave little room for such neat separations.

Critical thinking is often relegated to the domain of perspective building, as though it were merely a way of seeing. But within feminist learning spaces, it is far more than that. The work begins with cultivating a lens and a willingness to see the world differently, but this lens is neither abstract nor static. It demands effort. It must be held, practised, and renewed. To think critically is to engage in sustained labour, intellectual and emotional, that reshapes how one understands both the world and oneself.

Critical thinking is not acquired in a single moment of insight. It grows through repetition, through returning again and again to the same questions, contradictions, and experiences. Each return offers the possibility of seeing what was previously overlooked, of naming what once remained unspoken. These shifts are often subtle rather than dramatic. Yet within the constraints of our lives and contexts, they slowly expand what feels possible and open pathways to moments of freedom.

bell hooks reminds us of what is at stake in this process. In "Teaching to Transgress," she writes of turning to theory out of pain, out of a need to comprehend what was happening within and around her, and of finding in theory a place for healing. Her words resist the idea that criticality is an intellectual luxury or an optional add-on. For many who live with the weight of oppression, critical thinking is not a refinement of perspective but a means of survival, a way to make sense of hurt when changing the world is not immediately within reach.

This is why the notion that perspective building has a clear endpoint is so deeply flawed. Perspective is not something we arrive at and then carry forward unchanged. It is something we practise. When we began to understand perspective not only as a noun but also as a verb, it became evident that critical thinking functions as both orientation and skill.

It requires discipline, commitment, and training. It must be learned, sharpened, and sustained over time. A perspective cannot survive without the skills needed to hold and practise it. And skills, when detached from perspective, can mean very little. Afterall, isn't this the reason that we differentiate between leadership and feminist leadership?

Reflection No. 5

Discomfort is Necessary for Learning

Throughout our journey with Chingaari, one question kept returning to us: is comfort the same as safety? Or can safety also exist within discomfort? As facilitators, we live inside this tension. We are always calibrating. Are we pushing too far? Is it time to pause? Has something we introduced unsettled someone in a way that needs care? Should we slow down, soften the moment, offer relief? These are not signs of hesitation but of responsibility. To facilitate learning is to stay alert to the room, to read its silences and shifts, to feel its pulse and respond with care.

But care does not mean avoiding difficulty. It does not mean withholding rigor or steering away from questions that unsettle. Learning, especially feminist learning, cannot exist only to affirm. It cannot always feel good. When we begin to question what we have long taken for granted, our beliefs, our values, our sense of ourselves, discomfort is inevitable. To examine privilege, to recognise how our advantages are entangled with someone else's marginalisation, to acknowledge that we are all shaped by systems of power and that some of us benefit from them more than others, requires undoing deeply held assumptions. It asks us to unlearn patterns passed down across generations. This work is never convenient. It cannot always be gentle.

Amia Srinivasan reminds us that politics is not a space of comfort. If politics is where power is contested and injustice is named, then unease is not a sign that something has gone wrong. It is often the sign that something real is being confronted. Discomfort arises when we are forced to sit with disagreement, frustration, and moral complexity, when we are asked to look directly at our own complicities, and when we accept that there may be no outcome that feels clean or satisfying to everyone involved.

This is as true in learning spaces as it is in political life, since learning is also political. When comfort becomes the measure of safety, learning risks becoming hollow, more concerned with reassurance than transformation. Safety does not mean the absence of challenge. It means knowing that even when we are unsettled, we are not abandoned. That we can be held while our certainties are questioned. That we can stay with the discomfort long enough for something to shift.

Discomfort, then, is not the enemy of learning. It is often its beginning.

Reflection No. 6

Feminist Leadership does not look the same Everywhere

When we began Chingaari, our vision was, and continues to be, to nurture a robust community of women leaders - leaders who practice leadership with a feminist ethos, who collectivize and agitate for their rights, who create their own spaces and inspire others to do the same. Our enduring hope has been that this cadre of feminist leaders would go on to reshape systems and institutions, redistribute power more equitably, and find joy, care, and leisure along the way.

But as we reached the midpoint of the programme, we realized that even a singular vision can have multiple imaginations, and countless manifestations. Walking alongside a cohort of fifty women from diverse socio-economic backgrounds, generations, and geographies made this impossibly clear. For each participant, the same overarching vision of feminist leadership looked very different.

The women we worked with are not just recipients of a programme. They are meaning-makers of the process itself. Leadership is not always formal or visible. It is often exercised within the constraints of life stages, opportunities, and personal circumstances. One fellow led a session on workplace equality for a government line body in her city. Another facilitated conversations on gender and patriarchy for women in her community. A younger fellow chose to leave a discriminatory workplace and move to another city for better opportunities. Another paused her work to pursue higher education. Each of these choices, different as they are, reflects leadership in action.

Perhaps the most affirming learning was that leadership shows itself in many forms. It can be care, persistence, questioning, holding space, or choosing to speak up at a difficult moment. Ultimately, feminist leadership is not a single model to replicate - it is a set of values, practices, a way of being and acting in the world, that adapts to context, acknowledges constraints, and honours individual agency. The same vision can flourish in countless ways, and each manifestation is meaningful. It is this multiplicity, this refusal of a one-size-fits-all image, that makes feminist leadership resilient, transformative, and profoundly human.

And, it's a Wrap!

The first and the last lines of a book ask for a different kind of honesty. They carry the weight of everything that has come before and the quiet uncertainty of what will follow. As we wrote this book, we found ourselves reliving Chingaari. As Anaïs Nin wrote, "we write to taste life twice." That second tasting was no less intense than the first. It brought back moments of clarity and confusion, exhilaration and discomfort, tenderness and resolve.

In writing, we returned to conversations, silences, questions, and risks that shaped the journey. We felt again what it means to stay with discomfort, to learn alongside others, and to be changed by the process itself. This book holds those traces. In many ways, it carries pieces of our lives, released now from our hands.

As it travels beyond us, we hope it meets you where you are. That it unsettles as much as it affirms. That it offers moments of recognition, sparks new questions, and invites you into deeper reflection. If it brings even a fraction of the provocation, aliveness, and depth that Chingaari brought into our lives, then this journey, in all its messiness and meaning, will have been worth sharing.

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Glossary

Abelism 	Ableism means the way society, systems, and everyday behaviour treat some bodies and minds as "normal" and better, and treat others as less capable or less valuable. It appears in language, buildings, transport, rules, and institutions that are planned for non-disabled (able bodied) people. A wheelchair user, a short-statured person, or someone who cannot stand close to the machine may be unable to use it independently. The machine becomes a gatekeeper. Because of this, people with disabilities often can not access or have to make extra effort to access education, work, health care, and public life. The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities explains that disability happens when impairments meet barriers that stop people from taking part fully in society on an equal basis with others (CRPD, 2006). Ableism creates and keeps these barriers by deciding whose needs matter and whose needs are ignored. For example, a government office may have a long staircase at the entrance but no ramp or lift. This sends a message that wheelchair users are "not expected" to come in. Disability rights movements in India also explain ableism as discrimination based on the belief that disability is a "problem" that must be fixed, instead of a shared social duty to remove barriers and ensure dignity and access for all (National Centre for Promotion of Employment for Disabled People [NCPEDP],).
Brahminism 	Brahminism refers to an ideology and system of power that centres Brahminical authority as "superior," and organises society through caste hierarchy, ritual purity, and control over knowledge. Brahminical authority means the power of Brahmins and dominant caste institutions to define what is pure and impure, what is right and wrong, and which ways of living are treated as "correct." It shapes social life by deciding which communities are treated with dignity and respect, and which communities are treated as "polluting" or inferior. Under brahminism, communities placed at the top of the caste order, i.e, the upper castes gain easier access to learning, land, temples, and leadership, while communities placed at the bottom of the caste order Dalit-Bahujan communities face exclusion, stigma, and violence. It also shapes whose labour is valued and whose labour is treated as "low" or dirty. For example, work such as cleaning, disposing waste, handling carcasses, or sanitation has historically been forced onto dalit caste groups, and then used as a reason to deny them equal status and rights. Brahminism also shapes access to knowledge. It historically restricted reading, learning, and religious education for many caste groups, keeping knowledge and authority concentrated among only dominant castes.

	Anti-caste thinkers in India have shown that brahminism is sustained through religious and cultural sanction (Ambedkar, 1936/2004; Ilaiah, 1996). It becomes part of everyday life through rituals, festivals, traditions, and social rules around food, touch, entry into temples, and "respectability." It links caste privilege with control over institutions such as temples, schools, administration, and social organisations. This is why brahminism is not only about religion. It is a system of power that controls culture, values, and daily behaviour. For example, Brahminism can appear even in modern institutions when dominant caste ways of speaking, dressing, eating, and living are treated as "cultured" and "civilised," while Dalit-Bahujan ways of living are mocked or treated as backward. It can also appear when caste privilege is protected through the language of "merit," even when equal opportunities have never existed. Dr B. R. Ambedkar described caste as a system of "graded inequality," where inequality is arranged like a ladder, and each caste is placed above some and below others (Ambedkar, 1936/2014). This structure trains communities to accept inequality as normal. It prevents unity among oppressed groups because each level is encouraged to look down on another. Ambedkar also showed how caste is maintained through strict social rules and endogamy, meaning marriage within one's own caste. Endogamy keeps caste groups separated and blocks equality and social freedom. For example, inter-caste marriages are often strongly opposed, and couples may face social boycott, threats, and violence because such marriages break caste boundaries. Feminist scholar Uma Chakravarti explains that brahminism works closely with patriarchy through "Brahmanical patriarchy," where control over women's sexuality and marriage becomes central to maintaining caste boundaries (Chakravarti, 2003). In this system, women's choices become a site of caste control, and the "honour" of the caste is placed on women's bodies and behaviour. Caste purity is maintained by controlling women's mobility, relationships, and marriage decisions, especially in situations where inter-caste relationships are feared.For example, girls may face strict restrictions on travel, friendships, clothing, and education, and families may impose surveillance or punishment when girls exercise choice in love or marriage. When women resist such controls, the punishment is often harsh because brahminism depends on policing women to protect caste privilege.
Caste 	Caste is a system of social hierarchy that assigns people status, occupation, and social worth by birth. It shapes access to land, education, resources, respect, and safety. Caste operates through rules of purity and pollution, restrictions on marriage (endogamy), and social distance, including practices of untouchability. Dr B.R. Ambedkar explained that caste is not only a division of labour, it is a "division of labourers," where people are ranked as superior and inferior (Ambedkar, 1936/2014). Caste continues in modern forms through discrimination in housing, schools, workplaces, and public spaces, including violence against Dalits and Adivasis for asserting rights and dignity

Critical Pedagogy

Critical pedagogy is an approach to teaching and learning that connects education with freedom, dignity, and social justice. It aims for learners to think about their lives, ask questions, and understand how power works in society. In critical pedagogy, learners are seen as people with their own knowledge and lived experience, and learning becomes a shared process rather than one-way instruction. Feminist scholar bell hooks describes this approach through "engaged pedagogy," where teaching supports the full growth of the learner, including confidence, voice, and critical thinking. She explains that classrooms can become spaces where people learn to question domination and practice freedom through dialogue and participation (hooks, 1994). Education becomes meaningful when learners feel safe to speak, reflect, and connect knowledge to everyday reality.

Critical pedagogy also focuses on strengthening democracy and collective responsibility. Education scholar Henry Giroux explains that critical pedagogy links learning to democratic life by building the ability to question injustice and resist harmful systems. He describes education as a form of civic and moral practice that can prepare people to act against inequality and oppression (Giroux, 2020).

In feminist movements, critical pedagogy is used to challenge the idea that knowledge only comes from experts or textbooks. Feminist scholar Chandra Talpade Mohanty writes about "pedagogies of dissent," where learning is rooted in lived experience, solidarity, and collective struggle. This approach supports learners to see how discrimination works through caste, gender, class, race, and other hierarchies, and how people can organise for change (Mohanty, 2003/2017). In India, critical pedagogy is especially relevant for anti-caste and feminist work. It supports learning that challenges brahminical and patriarchal ideas, builds confidence among Dalit-Bahujan learners, and strengthens collective leadership in communities. For example, instead of teaching rights as legal words, a critical pedagogy approach asks learners to connect rights to real experiences, such as unequal treatment in schools, exclusion in public spaces, discrimination in health care, and violence in workplaces.

Disability 	Disability refers to long-term physical, mental, intellectual, or sensory impairments, along with the social and environmental barriers that restrict full participation. The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities defines persons with disabilities as those who have impairments which, in interaction with various barriers, may hinder full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others (CRPD, 2006). This definition shifts the focus from "individual limitation" to social responsibility. Disability rights work in India emphasizes that disability is part of human diversity, and that dignity, accessibility, and equal opportunity are central to inclusion (NCPEDP).
Equality 	Equality means every person has the same rights, dignity, and value, and has equal protection under law and public institutions. In human rights terms, equality is tied to non-discrimination, meaning people should have equal access to freedoms, opportunities, and services without being treated unfairly because of gender, caste, religion, disability, sexuality, class, or any other status. The Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights identifies equality and non-discrimination as core principles across human rights treaties (OHCHR, n.d.). In practice, equality requires fair rules, equal respect, and accountability when discrimination or violence occurs.In India, the Constitution places equality at the centre of fundamental rights. Article 14 guarantees equality before the law and equal protection of the laws, meaning the State must treat people fairly and cannot apply law differently to different groups (Constitution of India, 1950). Article 15 prohibits discrimination by the State on grounds such as religion, race, caste, sex, and place of birth (Constitution of India, 1950). In practice, equality requires fair rules, equal respect, and accountability when discrimination or violence occurs.
Equity 	Equity means fairness. It recognises that people start from different places because of historical and present-day inequality, so equal treatment alone does not produce equal outcomes. Equity focuses on removing barriers and ensuring that people who face exclusion have the resources, support, and opportunities needed to participate equally. UNESCO explains that inclusive education requires identifying barriers and removing them, so every learner matters equally (UNESCO, n.d.). In rights work, equity includes targeted measures such as accessibility, reservations, safe workplaces, and protections from violence, so that dignity and opportunity become real in everyday life.

Exclusion

Exclusion refers to the processes through which individuals or communities are kept out of spaces, services, and opportunities that are available to others. Exclusion can be open, such as denying entry, refusing services, or using threats and violence. It can also be indirect, such as using language, norms, infrastructure, or rules that make participation difficult for certain groups. UNESCO explains that exclusion in education happens because of barriers linked to factors such as social origin, gender, language, poverty, disability or ability, and other forms of inequality (UNESCO, n.d.).

In the Indian context, exclusion often operates through everyday systems that are presented as "normal." For example, a government school may have enrollment, homework, and parent-teacher meetings designed around families that have time, literacy, documents, phones, and stable housing. Children from migrant families, single-parent households, or families doing daily-wage work may miss school or drop out because the system does not adjust to their realities. Even when school is officially open to all, the design of schooling can still be excluded.

Exclusion also happens when public services become difficult to access for specific groups. For example, many welfare schemes require biometric authentication, repeated visits to offices, and documents that poor and marginalised families may not have. This creates exclusion without anyone openly saying "no." The service exists, but people who cannot meet the system's conditions are pushed out.

Exclusion can also happen through discrimination and stigma that targets Dalit, Adivasi, Muslim, disabled, and transgender persons. For example, people may be made to sit separately, denied equal access to water sources, treated disrespectfully in health care settings, or discouraged from entering certain jobs and institutions. In education settings, children from marginalised communities may face isolation, unequal treatment, and humiliating comments, which can push them out of school even without formal expulsion. Laws like the Right to Education Act recognise that admission should not be denied to any child, and schools are expected to accommodate children in difficult circumstances (Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009). These examples show that exclusion is about how systems are built and not just their absence.

Feminism 	Feminism is a political and ethical framework that works for the freedom, dignity, and equality of women and gender minorities. It challenges patriarchy, meaning the social and institutional systems that place men and male control above women and gender minorities, and shape unequal power in families, communities, workplaces, and public life. Feminism supports women and gender minorities to live without violence, coercion, and discrimination, and to have equal access to education, health care, livelihood, resources, public spaces, and leadership. Feminist thinker bell hooks defines feminism as a movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression (hooks, 2000). This definition is important because it makes feminism clear as a collective struggle against gender-based injustice, and not as a personal opinion or identity label. Feminism works to change social norms, institutions, and daily practices that keep women and gender minorities unequal. Kamla Bhasin describes feminism as a politics for women's liberation and equality that challenges patriarchal control in everyday life, including control over women's bodies, labour, mobility, and choices (Bhasin, 2003). Feminism also includes building spaces where women and gender minorities can speak, organise, and lead. Scholar Sara Ahmed explains feminism as something people live and practice, an everyday commitment to noticing inequality and refusing to accept it as normal (Ahmed, 2017). In this sense, feminism is both a way of thinking and a way of acting, through collective strength, shared leadership, and solidarity.
Gender Binary 	Gender binary refers to the idea that there are only two genders, male and female, and that every person must fit fully into one of these two categories. It links gender to sex assigned at birth and expects fixed roles, behaviours, and appearance. In a gender binary system, masculine and feminine are treated as opposite and separate. Masculine is commonly defined as qualities that society associates with boys and men, such as being strong, tough, fearless, dominant, loud, rational, and leadership-oriented. Masculinity is often linked to control, decision-making, earning income, and authority in the family and community. Feminine is commonly defined as qualities that society associates with girls and women, such as being soft-spoken, gentle, caring, modest, obedient, emotional, and "adjusting." Femininity is often linked to care work, domestic labour, sacrifice, and supporting others.

These ideas are cultural expectations, yet the gender binary treats them like rules. It expects men to be masculine and women to be feminine, and it punishes people who do not fit these expectations. It also decides how bodies should look and behave. This is often called gender expression, meaning how a person expresses gender through clothes, hairstyle, voice, body language, and behaviour. Under the gender binary, certain expressions are labelled "appropriate" and others are labelled "wrong." For example, a boy who is gentle, emotional, or enjoys traditionally feminine clothes or interests may be mocked or punished. A girl who is outspoken, ambitious, physically active, or prefers traditionally masculine clothes may be called "unladylike" and controlled. The gender binary also dictates gender roles and responsibilities in everyday life. It decides what work is expected from people and what choices are allowed. Men are expected to earn money, travel freely, speak in public, and make decisions. Women are expected to do unpaid domestic work, child care, elder care, cooking, cleaning, and to follow restrictions on mobility and behaviour. The gender binary turns these expectations into duty and makes inequality appear natural. The gender binary shapes institutions in everyday ways. For example, a school may enforce dress codes that link skirts and long hair with "good girls" and trousers and short hair with "good boys." If a student expresses gender differently, teachers may call it "indiscipline" and punish the student. In families, the gender binary often decides responsibilities from childhood. A boy may be excused from washing utensils, cooking, or caring for younger siblings because this is treated as "girls' work," while a girl may be expected to take on these responsibilities daily and reduce time for study, play, or rest. In many homes, even the right to go out freely, return late, or travel for education gets distributed through this binary.

Many cultures and communities have long recognised gender diversity beyond two categories, including trans and non-binary identities. Health agencies describe gender as socially constructed characteristics, including norms, roles, and relationships, which vary across societies and can change over time (WHO, 2021). This helps explain that masculinity and femininity are not fixed by biology. They are produced through social rules and conditioning. Challenging the gender binary supports dignity and rights for people whose identities and expressions do not fit narrow categories. It also supports freedom for women and men by reducing the pressure to perform masculinity and femininity in limited ways.

Gender Norms 	Gender norms are social expectations about how women, men, girls, and boys should behave, dress, speak, work, and relate to others. They shape ideas of what is "appropriate" and often reward conformity while punishing difference. The World Health Organization explains that gender includes socially constructed norms, behaviours, and roles, upheld through institutions such as education, religion, law, and media (WHO, 2021). Gender norms influence mobility, safety, labour, and leadership, and they often restrict women and gender-diverse persons. Transforming gender norms supports equality, shared care work, and freedom of choice.
Inclusion 	Inclusion means creating environments where every person can participate fully, with dignity, safety, and equal opportunity. Inclusion focuses on belonging, access, and meaningful participation rather than mere presence. Meaningful inclusion means people can enter and exist in a space without fear or humiliation, understand what is happening, contribute their ideas, and influence decisions as equals. UNESCO explains inclusion clearly through the example of education. UNESCO states that inclusive education works to identify all barriers to education and remove them, covering everything from curriculum to pedagogy and teaching (UNESCO, n.d.). This shows what inclusion actually involves. Inclusion is not achieved by simply bringing excluded learners into the same classroom. Inclusion happens when the system changes so everyone can learn well. UNICEF explains inclusive education as ensuring all children learn together and get meaningful learning opportunities, especially those who have been historically excluded due to poverty, language, gender, migration, and social marginalisation (UNICEF, n.d.). For example, meaningful inclusion in a school means teaching methods are adapted for different learning needs. Language and content are made understandable for first-generation learners. Classroom examples reflect diverse lives instead of one "normal" experience. Teachers actively prevent discrimination, bullying, and humiliation. The school takes responsibility for removing barriers instead of expecting learners to adjust silently. In the workplace context, the International Labour Organization (ILO) describes inclusion through the idea of equal opportunity and non-discrimination, meaning systems should be designed so that identity or background does not block people from fair access to work, respect, and growth (ILO, n.d.).

Intersectionality

Intersectionality is a way of understanding how different aspects of a person's identity come together to shape their life experiences. The term was coined by Black feminist scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw to explain how systems of inequality such as gender, race, caste, and class do not act independently but overlap and interact. She showed that people who belong to more than one marginalized group often face forms of discrimination that cannot be understood by looking at each identity separately. For example, the experiences of Black women are not simply a combination of racism and sexism. These forces work together in ways that create distinct realities, which are often overlooked when inequality is examined through a single lens.

Building on this work, Indian feminist scholar Mary E. John describes intersectionality as a way of understanding the lives of those who tend to disappear from dominant political and social thinking. She cautions against treating intersectionality as a simple counting of disadvantages, such as being doubly or triply oppressed. This approach reduces complex experiences to "more of the same." As John explains, the challenges faced by Muslim women, Dalit women, or Adivasi women are not just worse versions of gender inequality but are shaped by specific and interconnected structures of power. Intersectionality, therefore, is not an additive framework but a way of asking deeper questions about how multiple forms of inequality operate at the same time to shape people's lives in distinct and specific ways.

Knowledge as Power

Knowledge as power refers to the idea that knowledge is not simply about learning or information, but about control. Those who decide what counts as knowledge, who can produce it, and who can access it, also shape social hierarchies and maintain systems of power. Knowledge hierarchies are actively created and protected to consolidate dominance, while excluding and discrediting the knowledge of marginalized people. In this way, control over knowledge becomes a powerful tool of oppression.

In the Indian context, brahmanical systems of power have long used knowledge to preserve caste and gender hierarchies. Sacred texts, languages such as Sanskrit, and institutions of learning were tightly controlled, ensuring that knowledge remained in the hands of upper-caste men. This control did not only deny education to Dalits, Adivasis, and women, but also positioned their experiences, skills, and worldviews as inferior or illegitimate. By deciding whose knowledge mattered, brahmanism reinforced its authority and normalized inequality. These structures continue in contemporary forms. Today, brahmanical power operates through academic institutions, cultural authority, media, and policy spaces, where upper-caste perspectives are often treated as neutral, objective, or universal. Dalit, Adivasi, and Bahujan voices are frequently expected to prove their credibility, while dominant-caste knowledge circulates without question. This ongoing control of knowledge production and recognition helps sustain caste privilege in modern settings.

Feminist thinking has played a crucial role in challenging dominant ways of knowing that are shaped by masculinity, hierarchy, and control. Dominant knowledge systems often value distance, abstraction, competition, and authority, while dismissing emotion, care, embodiment, and relational learning. Feminism questions these assumptions and asserts that lived experience, care work, memory, and collective wisdom are valid sources of knowledge. It also exposes how men's perspectives have been treated as universal, while women's knowledge has been marked as personal or secondary.

By challenging who speaks, who is believed, and how learning happens, feminist approaches work to democratize knowledge. They seek not only to expand access to existing knowledge systems, but also to transform them, making space for multiple ways of thinking, learning, and leading. In doing so, feminism treats knowledge not as a tool for domination, but as a shared resource for justice and collective liberation.

Pedagogy 	Pedagogy refers to the way teaching and learning happen. It is not only about what is taught, but how it is taught, who is teaching, who is learning, and the relationship between them. Pedagogy includes the methods, values, and assumptions that shape learning spaces such as classrooms, training rooms, and community settings. Pedagogy reflects power. Traditional forms of teaching often place the teacher as the authority, knowledge-holder and the learner as passive, expected to listen, memorize, and obey. This approach can silence questions, ignore lived experience, and make learning feel distant or intimidating, especially for those who have been excluded from education. A more inclusive understanding of pedagogy sees learning as a shared process. It values dialogue, participation, and mutual respect. Learners are encouraged to ask questions, share their experiences, and connect learning to their everyday lives. In this approach, learning becomes an act of care and responsibility, not control.
Protection-ism 	Protectionism is the practice of shielding certain groups, from risks, responsibilities, or challenges, with the intention of keeping them "safe." While it may seem caring on the surface, protectionism often limits freedom, opportunity, and participation. It assumes that certain people cannot make decisions for themselves or handle difficulties, which can reinforce inequality rather than reduce it. In the context of inclusion, protectionism is seen as inadequate and even harmful. For example, women may be discouraged from taking on leadership roles, working night shifts, or traveling alone in the name of "safety." While these restrictions are presented as care, they actually prevent women from accessing the same opportunities as men and from fully exercising their agency. Protectionism can also appear in family, educational, or workplace settings, where well-meaning policies or behaviors end up restricting growth. True inclusion, by contrast, focuses on creating supportive environments where all people can participate equally, take risks, and make their own choices while having the resources and protections they need—not being held back by assumptions of vulnerability.

Queer

Queer is a term that describes persons whose sexual orientation, gender identity, or expression falls outside conventional norms of "male" and "female" or "heterosexual." It includes, but is not limited to, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, non-binary, and other identities, expressions and sexual orientations that challenge dominant social expectations.

Queer is also a way of seeing and understanding the world. Queer theory, developed by scholars such as Judith Butler and Gayle Rubin, shows that the world is structured around heterosexuality and cisgender norms. Social, political, and economic systems rely on certain ways of producing and reproducing gender and sexuality to maintain power. For example, norms around heterosexual marriage, procreation, and gendered labor reproduce not only social hierarchies but also economic systems, shaping both the workforce and family life. Queer thinking reveals how human expressions, desires, and identities are regulated to fit these norms, and how deviations from them are often marginalized or punished.

The history of the term reflects its resistance to such regulation. "Queer" was once used as a slur to stigmatize those who did not conform to heterosexual and cisgender expectations. In the 1980s and 1990s, queer activists and scholars reclaimed the word, particularly during movements responding to HIV/AIDS and broader struggles for rights and recognition. The reclamation challenged both social prejudice and the limitations of fixed identity labels, making "queer" a tool to critique norms and highlight structural inequalities in gender and sexuality.

Using queer as a lens helps to see how identities, desires, and bodies are shaped by larger power systems. At the same time, queerness is a contested space. As it becomes more visible, it can be co-opted by dominant institutions, media, or market forces, which produce new norms of "being queer" that risk erasing the diversity of experiences, especially those that exist outside formal identity categories. Queer remains both a critical perspective and a site of struggle over who is recognized, whose knowledge counts, and how social norms are challenged or reproduced.

Reasonable Accomodation 	Adjustments or changes made in a workplace, school, or other environment to ensure that people with disabilities can participate fully and equally. This can include things like flexible schedules, accessible spaces, assistive technology, or extra support. Reasonable accommodation is about removing barriers, valuing diverse abilities, and making sure everyone has a fair chance to contribute and lead.
Rights-based Approach 	A rights-based approach is a way of understanding and practicing development, governance, and social change that places human rights at its core. It begins with the idea that rights are inalienable, that they belong to every person by virtue of being human, not because they are granted by charity, goodwill, or development programs. This approach recognizes that marginalization is not accidental, but produced by long-standing systems of power that privilege some groups while excluding others based on gender, caste, class, disability, religion, or ethnicity. The roots of the rights-based approach lie in the aftermath of the Second World War, a moment marked by mass violence, genocide, displacement, and the exposure of how unchecked power can dehumanize entire populations. In response, the international community adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948, asserting that dignity, equality, and freedom must be protected for all people, everywhere. This marked a historic shift: suffering and exclusion were no longer seen as inevitable or internal matters of the state, but as violations of shared human principles that demanded accountability. The rights-based approach grew from this moment, challenging both global and national systems that produced inequality and injustice. In contrast to earlier development models that treated poverty and exclusion as problems to be managed through aid or welfare, a rights-based approach reframes development as a matter of justice. It insists that development without redistribution, reparation, and a direct challenge to unequal power relations is meaningless. It asks not only what resources are provided, but who controls them, whose voices are heard, and whose lives are considered expendable within the existing world order. In India, this approach draws strength from the Constitution, which was itself shaped by struggles against colonial rule, as well as social hierarchies of caste, gender and religion. Constitutional guarantees of equality, dignity, and freedom have informed movements for the right to education, the right to information, women's rights, the anti-caste struggle and disability rights. These movements have used a rights-based framework to demand accountability from the state and to challenge systems that normalize exclusion.

By centering dignity, equality, and participation, the rights-based approach has transformed how development and social change are understood. It affirms people as active rights-holders rather than passive beneficiaries and has been central to social and political movements that insist on an oppression-free world built on justice, inclusion, and shared humanity.

Sexuality

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), sexuality is "a central aspect of being human throughout life, encompassing sex, gender identities and roles, sexual orientation, eroticism, pleasure, intimacy, and reproduction." It is not limited to sexual activity, but also includes desires, relationships, identity, and the ways people express themselves.

Feminist scholarship has shown that control over sexuality, especially women's sexuality, has been a fundamental mechanism for maintaining patriarchal power. Classical feminist theorists like Sylvia Walby, Gerda Lerner, and Maria Mies have highlighted how the regulation of women's sexuality is central to sustaining patriarchal social institutions such as monogamous marriage, the family, and systems of inheritance. The norms of "virtue," "chastity," and the ideal of the "good woman" are political tools designed to control women's bodies, restrict their choices, and reproduce a patriarchal social order across generations. Feminists in the 1960s and 1970s began explicitly focusing on sexuality because they recognized that liberation from patriarchal oppression could not happen without challenging these deeply entrenched norms. They argued that sexual freedom - the freedom to express desire, choose partners, and make decisions about one's own body, was inseparable from social, economic, and political equality.

In the Indian context, scholars like Uma Chakravarti and Leela Dube have shown how Brahminical patriarchy relies on the control of women's sexuality to maintain caste hierarchies, enforce endogamous marriage, regulate reproduction, and secure the caste-based lineage and inheritance of property. Sexual regulation is therefore not only a matter of private morality, but a social and political mechanism that reproduces inequality and upholds oppressive social orders.

The state also plays a central role in regulating sexuality. Laws, policies, and institutions dictate who can marry, who can have children, and what sexual behaviors are considered legal or acceptable. In India, examples include the historical criminalization of adultery, laws around same-sex relationships, and regulations on reproductive health and abortion. These measures do more than enforce morality; they reinforce power structures, uphold heteronormativity, and determine whose desires and identities are considered legitimate. Feminists and queer theorists argue that challenging these state controls is essential to securing sexual rights as fundamental human rights.

State 	The state is the organized system of government and institutions that has the power to make and enforce laws, manage public resources, and regulate society. It includes the legislature, the courts, the police, and other official bodies. The state shapes how resources, rights, and opportunities are distributed, and it often plays a central role in maintaining or challenging social hierarchies, including systems of gender, caste, class, and economic inequality.
Structures of Power 	Structures of power are the systems, institutions, dominant value systems, socio-cultural norms, and hierarchies that determine who has authority, resources, control, influence, voice, legitimacy, and decision-making power in a society. These structures include the political economy, the state, caste, patriarchy, religion, media, culture, and enduring historical legacies such as the continued global dominance of the Global West in the world order. They often reinforce one another, so that inequality in one area supports inequality in others, establishing long-lasting hierarchies of dominance and control across countries and peoples. Understanding structures of power helps explain how exclusion and marginalization are not isolated events, but are embedded in the everyday functioning of social, institutional, and state systems. These structures shape who is valued, whose rights are protected, and whose voices are heard. They are maintained through laws, policies, institutional decisions, cultural norms, and social hierarchies, making inequality appear normal or natural rather than the result of historically entrenched systems. Redistributing power is therefore central to inclusion, as it challenges these historical structures and creates space for those who have been excluded to participate fully in society.

Transgender (Person)

Trans or transgender is an umbrella term that describes people whose gender identity or gender expression differs from the sex they were assigned at birth. It includes, but is not limited to, trans women, trans men, non-binary persons, gender diverse persons, and others whose lived experience of gender does not align with dominant assumptions about fixed male and female categories. Being trans is about gender identity, not sexual orientation, and trans persons may have any sexual orientation.

Using trans as a lens helps expose how power operates through the regulation of bodies, identities, and movement across social categories. It highlights how gender norms are maintained through institutional authority and how those who cross or disrupt these norms are often marginalized. Trans studies and trans feminist scholarship show that social, legal, medical, and political systems are structured around cisgender norms, meaning the assumption that everyone's gender identity naturally matches their assigned sex at birth. These systems regulate bodies through documents, institutions, healthcare, education, and labor markets, determining whose genders are recognized as legitimate and whose are treated as deviant, unstable, or in need of correction. Trans perspectives reveal how gender is enforced through everyday practices, from identification papers and public bathrooms to medical gatekeeping and workplace expectations.

Historically, trans persons have been subjected to pathologization, criminalization, and violence. Medical and legal systems have often treated trans identities as disorders or required proof, surveillance, or conformity to rigid gender norms in order to grant recognition or access to care. At the same time, trans communities have long resisted these forms of control through activism, mutual support, and knowledge production, challenging the idea that gender must be fixed, binary, or biologically determined.

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