Gender
at work
India

UN
WOMEN
GENERATION EQUALITY

FEMINIST YOUTH

LEADERSHIP PROGRAMME

NEEDS ASSESSMENT REPORT

Founded as a nonprofit trust in January 2015, Gender at Work India uses an intersectional feminist approach to raise institutional standards by building architectures for diversity, gender, equity and inclusion within workspaces in India.

This work is supported by UN Women India.

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INTRODUCTION

The Generation Equality Forum (GEF), convened by UN Women in 2021, kickstarted a five-year process of intergenerational, multi-stakeholder convergence around the goal of achieving irreversible gender equality. In undertaking this process intervention, Gender at Work India hopes to advance the GEF mandate by strengthening action coalitions of selected pan India youth leaders to build secondary and tertiary impacts, and promote just, equitable, intersectional feminist agendas.

This process intervention is specifically located in the context of a shrinking civil society, a nation mired in deep chasms, and several draconian laws and policies clamping down on movement-building. With a constantly shifting landscape of political realities, youth activism has also morphed and adapted to be more effective, while simultaneously 'calling in' their own movements for lack of diversity and substantial representation.

The goal of this undertaking, then, is three-fold.

01 The first is to map and improve our contextualised understanding of what feminist youth leadership in India may look like in its many current iterations, with a focus on marginalised identities and assertions. This has been done through a methodical **needs assessment**, which includes a literature review of secondary sources, a mapping of curriculums developed for youth and feminist leadership in India, and detailed interviews with youth leaders to understand where the gaps lie, vis a vis access, resources, and perspectives, in the praxis of feminist leadership.

02 The second goal is to borrow the gap analysis from the needs assessment to build a curriculum and pedagogy for feminist youth leadership in civil society in India.
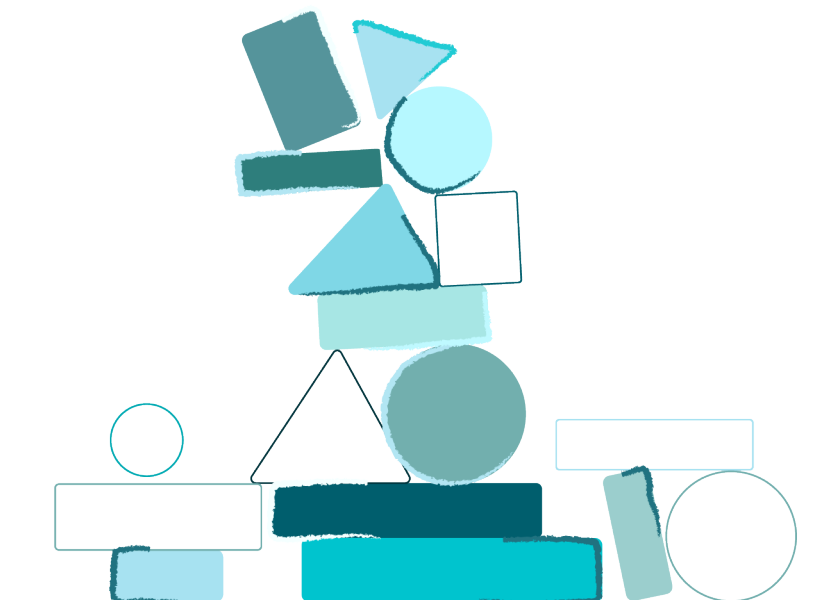
03 The third goal is to pilot the curriculum and pedagogy, and to document some of these process learnings through a white paper.
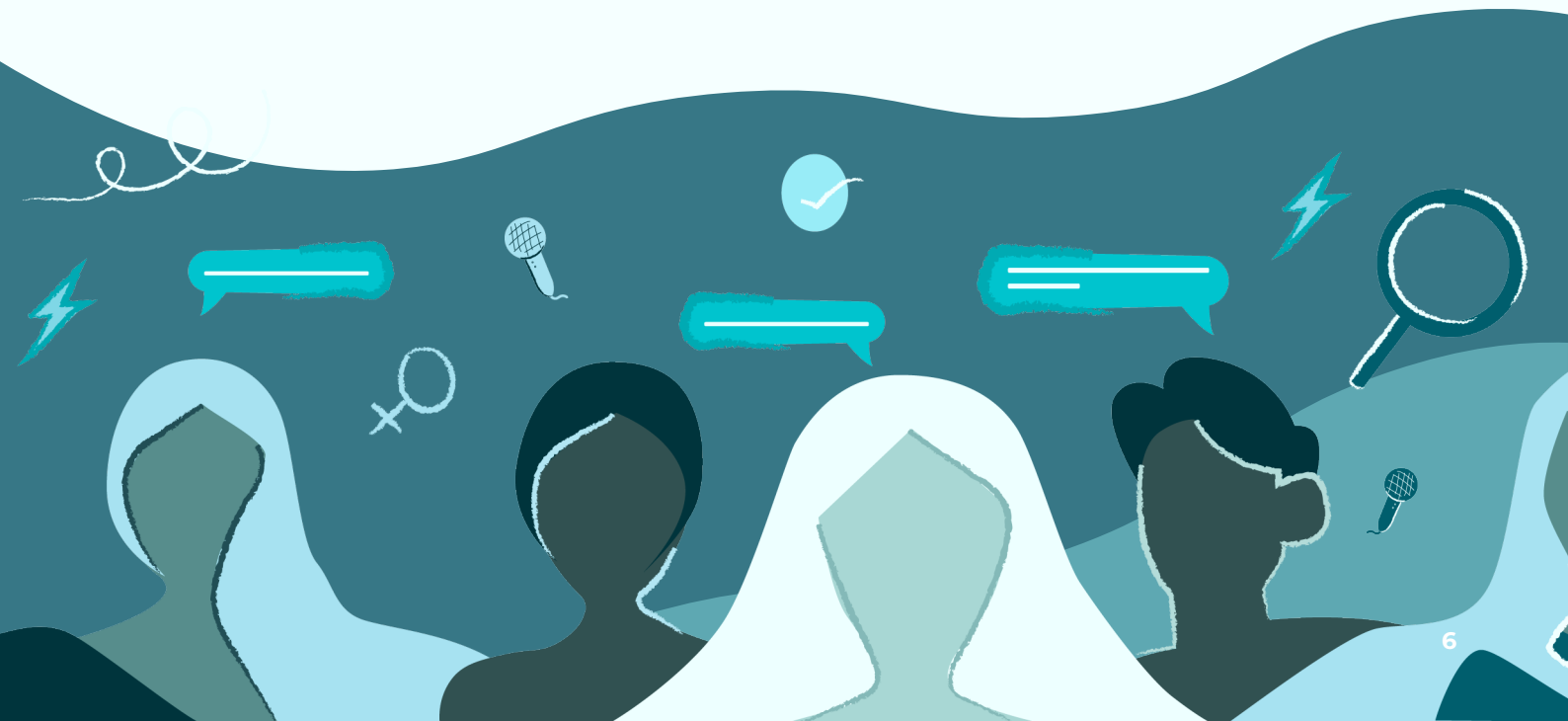
Thus, this process intervention has taken a ground-up approach to understanding, operationalising, and building resources for feminist youth leadership in India, while simultaneously unpacking the context in which these are embedded. We hope that the research both informs and is informed by the praxis (curriculum building and piloting), in an attempt to build a process composite that is at once iterative and intentional.

As mentioned above, the needs assessment is part of a larger agenda to build an understanding of what feminist youth leadership may look like in the contemporary context of the country. The study attempted to build an understanding of the political journeys of young people, their perceptions and experience of activism and leadership, their relationship with feminism, support systems that enable their work, challenges faced, and their recommendations to build and nurture youth leadership.

As part of the needs assessment, we spoke to 24 young leaders from diverse locations. This document details the findings of the study and offers insights rooted in the participants' experience of engaging with various movements across the country. The introduction is followed by a section on methodology followed during data collection and data analysis of the needs assessment. After that, we present the findings of the study.

METHODOLOGY

The study uses a qualitative methodology, to allow for an in-depth exploration of the questions at hand. The data collection process included in-depth interviews with young people involved in some form of social change work in a leadership role.

For the purpose of the study, we define any one between the age of 15 – 35 years as youth. We adopted a mix of purposive and snowballing sampling techniques to identify the participants of the study. The parameters of inclusion consisted of age, gender, caste, region, disability, sexuality, religion, and class, along with their area of work. This ensured that we reached out to a diverse mix of young people operating out of different contexts for different causes. Keeping the parameters in mind, a list consisting of young activists and leaders in our networks was drawn. The potential respondents were approached and a participant information sheet was shared with them detailing the project, scope of their participation and rights of participants. Interviews were conducted after obtaining informed consent. At the end of every interview, participants were requested to recommend young leaders who could be part of the study.

We collected data from these participants through in-depth interviews, often 60-90 minutes long. We contacted participants over email and phone for interview appointments and obtained informed consent using electronic forms. We developed a semi-structured interview guide for data collection. It covered the respondents'

- journey into and within the movement

- their roles and responsibilities

- experiences of being a leader

- their context of operation

- resources and support systems that enable their work

- their engagement with feminism and leadership.

As mentioned above, informed consent was obtained from participants before the interview, and ethical mandates of consent, confidentiality, and sensitivity were followed throughout the process of data collection. We have taken great care to anonymise the transcripts of the interviews and to mention only those identity markers as mentioned and consented to by the participants. We spoke to the participants virtually, through Zoom, between the months of April and July 2022. The interviews were recorded, transcribed in the language of the interview, and translated to English. All forms of communication, including the interviews were conducted in the language of participants' choice. Along with the research team, Arundhati Sridhar and Shruti Sharma from Gender at Work India conducted interviews in English and Hindi. In case of our team members were unacquainted with a particular language, we brought external experienced researchers on-board. These external researchers conducted the interviews according to the participants' comfort (in Telugu, Tamil and Kannada), transcribed them, and translated them in English.

We used Dedoose – a software for qualitative data analysis – to code the data transcripts into themes. Eventually, we arrived at a thematic tree from which we have culled our findings presented in this paper. Given the heterogeneity among the young leaders engaged in social change work in the country, the findings carry the risk of being not generalisable. However, we have aimed to present each standpoint authentically, in the hopes of understanding the issue at hand in an iterative and representative fashion.

FINDINGS

In this section, we present findings that have emerged from the data collection process. As mentioned in the previous section, we conducted in-depth interviews to gain a holistic understanding of the youth activism ecosystem in India, along with young people's relationships with leadership and feminism. The section begins with a detailed description about the participants, and is followed by a sub-section on the contexts in which they operate and how they operate. The last three parts of the chapter focusses on the participants' perception of and relationship with leadership and feminism, and their recommendations for fostering youth leadership in the country.

Who are our participants?

As part of the needs assessment, we spoke to 24 youth leaders from India to gather insights on the current ecosystem of youth-led activism. Our participants, at the time of data collection, were between the ages of 16 and 35, belonging to diverse social and geographical locations, and working across different movements and causes.
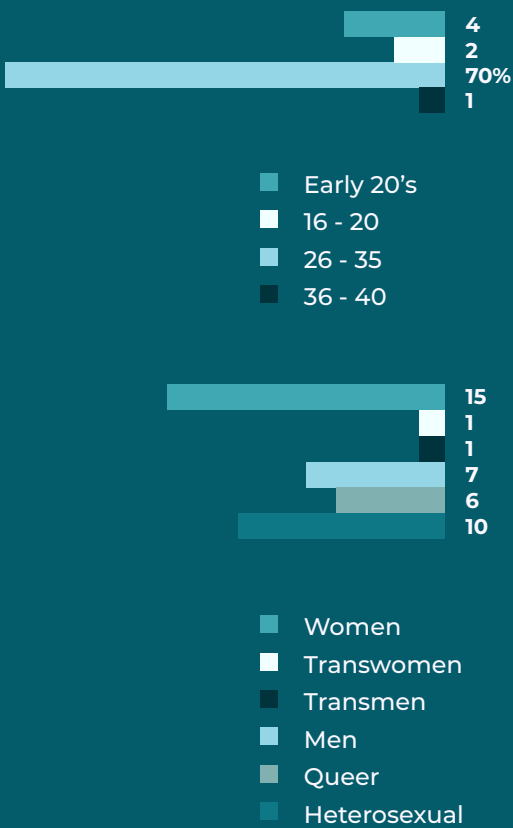
The participants operate from various parts of the country – while ten of them are based in Southern India, nine work in the North, and five from the North-Eastern states. The geographical area of work has direct implications on activism as it decides the backdrop of politicisation and the nature of movements. Due to migration for education, employment or other reasons, few participants also operate from areas

different than that of their home state. This trend is dominant among leaders working within student movements or with non-governmental organisations (NGOs). The exposure to various regions, spaces and their political contexts is seen to have a definitive impact on the participants' understanding of issues, perception of movements, and nature of work.

Below, we provide information about the social location – in terms of gender, age, sexuality, caste, and religion – as self-identified by the participants. Our process of obtaining informed consent gave them the choice of disclosing all or only certain identities. We were cognizant of the fact that not all participants would be comfortable disclosing different aspects of their self-identity. For instance, some participants were more comfortable disclosing their caste identities and not their sexual orientation.

Around 70% of the participants were aged between 26-35, while one person was aged between 36-40, four were in their early twenties, and two were between 16-20 years. We spoke to fifteen women, one transwoman, one transman and seven men, all between the ages of 16-40. Six participants identified themselves as queer, while ten of them identified as heterosexual, and the rest refused to disclose their sexuality. In terms of caste, six belonged to OBC, two each belonged to ST and SC, one identified as Most Backward Caste, and one identified themselves as anti-caste.

The participants worked across a range of causes and movements. To broadly categorise, the area of activism was either community-based/ advocacy-based macro-level work, or identity-based, or specific to educational or workplaces. Some participants also worked on specific social issues alongside an NGO.

4
2
70%
1

■ Early 20's
□ 16 - 20
■ 26 - 35
■ 36 - 40

15
1
1
7
6
10

■ Women
□ Transwomen
■ Transmen
■ Men
■ Queer
■ Heterosexual

The first category comprises *social justice activists, leaders involved in electoral politics, activists helming citizenship rights movements, and young people involved in various causes through advocacy, policy work and art practices*. We further spoke to leaders from *Adivasi rights movement, anti-caste movement, disability rights movement, women's rights movement and queer-trans rights movement.* The participants also included *labour rights activists, farmers' rights activists, leaders from students' movements, and leaders of NGOs working on gender rights, youth development, women's agency building, and the right to education*. However, there are no distinct demarcations between these categories or areas of work. Depending on their identities, exposure, experiences and context of operation, the participants engaged in multiple areas of activism – all at once or through the course of time.

i.   What youth means to our participants?

We interviewed the participants about their experiences of being young and the challenges their age presents regarding their activism. The fluid nature of evolution of one's area(s) of work or activism was often attributed as a trait of youthhood in itself. Participants felt that youth is the period of transition from childhood to adulthood where one is hopeful, enthusiastic, willing to learn and expose oneself to new ideas, take a stand on issues, and innovate. Such vigour, it was felt, inspires both younger and older people to engage and join the movement. It was also felt that youthhood is not tied to age but certain qualities that people can have irrespective of age.

> When you were talking about young people, leadership, and other things, I wanted to ask you the same thing, what do you mean? Is there a certain age group, is there a definition? Because you can be 60 and you can be young, and you can be 30 and you can be young. But I think, having … contemporary knowledge … I don't know if working for the right things is considered young. But then I feel … even if you are old, there are some people who come into the category of young people, who **have this desire for positive changes, qualitative changes in the community as well when working with**

them … Someone who has some kind of **contemporary knowledge, of the way things are going, how they should be**, supposed to be. I think that's it.

- Mying, 29, Community Development Practitioner.

The experience of being a young person meant different things to the participants depending on their background.

For Varsha, a climate justice activist from Delhi, youthhood is an in-between phase with **"one foot in childhood, one foot in adulthood".**

his was a commonly articulated idea among some of the participants. However, if one uses the lens of intersectionality, we can argue what it means to be a young person can vary exponentially depending on their context and identities. The attributes associated with youth often assume a certain ability, affluence, and socio-cultural capital and identities tied to intergenerational wealth and privilege.

Pavan, 26, a Phule-Ambedkarite activist from Telangana, argues,

There is nothing called young, there is nothing called youth. I mean, for example, if you are a worker, if you are working in a trade union, you are a trade union activist, you are a worker there. You are identifying as a worker and the worker doesn't have any age, right? Now there are child laborers, right? This way, I think this … I mean, one needs to look at this category of youth and young very carefully.

In the context of movement-building, the experience of being discriminated against due to age was something that most participants mentioned. They described feeling belittled, invisibilised, dismissed, and their opinions neglected. The nature of discrimination varied depending on their social locations. Youth from marginalised communities find their labour exploited and appropriated, while excluded from decision-making spaces. They expressed that some people acquire leadership owing to their social capital rather than the merit of their work.

> Being a young person in the movement is not being seen. **Your identity is invisibilised.** You being young, your voice is not heard and it is again a **tokenistic representation of young people**. It is always the … oldies talking. **We young people are in some sense foot soldiers. And if you are from a marginalised community, you are not seen at all.** Even within the young people's movement, there are a **few faces that are prominent and most of them are from privileged backgrounds and "appropriate spaces",** and they act like they are the youth leaders. But that is not true at all. And you would see that the actual youth leadership is something that you see on the ground - **the mobilisation power they have, the knowledge they have.** They **may not have the language to speak** to you and me, they may not have the optics to be seen on social media or be in the right places saying the right things. But they are the actual leaders. Due to various reasons, **due to lack of resources of all kinds, they always remain in the background.**
>
> *- Mythili, 34, intersectional feminist activist.*

Here we see the structural exclusion of marginalised youth being replicated within movement spaces. In other contexts, participants report ageist exclusion as being institutionalised through customary practises.

In Manipuri we say tutche and tanor. Tanur means young. So, when you are young and when you are a woman, they have a very negative notion towards you when it comes to decision-making or when it comes to working. Also, the community is ruled by generational governance. Generational governance is where they have around 5 generations. The youngest generation, if you have a meeting for the village, for the union or the citizens have their meeting, the youngest generation will be working to serve tea, edibles, etc. The rest of them will have their meetings. So, the oldest generation or group of people have their say, [it] has the most power in the community. If a young person comes and says something, even if you are saying something right, they won't accept that.

- Mying, 29, community development practitioner.

The inequities and unequal access to resources makes it impossible for a homogenous category of youth to even exist. Crip and queer theories point out that the definition of youth has been for long a result of the fixation on normative age transition within the Western context. Linear age cannot be the only defining criteria that constitutes the category(ies) of youth, different bodies experience time and youthfulness differently. Further, research on childhood poverty and wellbeing of young people in India shows that the disadvantages of caste, gender, and poverty shape the life experiences and outcomes of children, and mark their transition from childhood to adulthood **(Singh and Mukherjee, 2019).**

Caste-class-gender barriers shape the life courses of young people and operate to ensure there are limitations to inter-mingling among young people from different backgrounds, as often expressed by our participants.

As a young Dalit first-generation learner who is currently pursuing his second MA from a premier institute, Kranti feels that youthhood is also the period one attains education which consequently shifts others' perception about him and earns him respect.

> During my under-graduation and intermediate, I didn't have proper clothes to wear. We were quite poor. I would observe who is wearing what kind of pants, what kind of clothes. **The way people look at us and treat us changes if we don't dress well, speak well, or if we are tanned because of being in the sun.** Some people let us enter their circles and some don't. For example, when they host parties and such, you understand the kind of attention they give to you. You understand whether they're paying attention to you, whether they're inviting you or not. This has certainly changed if I compare my past and present … Earlier, many people in the movement, particularly government employees, would not pay any attention to me. Now, that has changed. Because whenever I bump into them now, they immediately sit me down and invite me for small talk over tea. They ask about my work and discuss politics with me. I find this very interesting.

Participants hence argue for spaces or platforms that can facilitate learning and conversations among young people from different backgrounds. They argue that politicisation needs to start at listening to and understanding each other within the movement.

ii. Understanding youth activists through their identities

The study reiterates the centrality of identities in shaping the worldviews and experiences of being a young leader. As Isai, a citizenship rights activist puts it, "our identity is at the core of everything that we are right now. And we cannot escape it".

"

"our identity is at the core of everything that we are right now. And we cannot escape it"

Our participants had varied relationships with their identities. While Kranti perceived his caste identity as the root of his motivation to join the anti-caste movement, Georgie's savarna caste identity and lineage opened doors for him in electoral politics. Deniz, a Mundari transwoman, says she has "taken a middle path" in relation to her gender identity, as a deliberate political stance. By this, she means that she neither overtly asserts her gender identity nor does she hide it. Only if the topic overtly presents itself, she engages with it. Engagement with the movement gave Srutija the space and courage to own up her identity as a Dalit woman. For Ocean, cultural activism in his village is a way to assert his queerness and resist the erasure of his community.

> There is no word to tell that I am queer, or I am gay in Manipuri … We have a slang, but we don't really have a word. But I don't want to use the slang for sure because it is so derogatory. So, you know, a slang cannot be my identity marker.
>
> *- Ocean, 32, male, queer rights activist.*

On the other hand, struggles led by certain participants were aimed at claiming state-validation – as citizens in the case of anti CAA-NRC movement, as farmers in the case of the struggle to get the state and society to recognise women as farmers. Even within movement spaces, identities play a key role. Instances of discrimination within workspaces, exclusion from opportunities, and violence were relayed by several participants owing to their marginalised identities.

Participants also identified themselves by different political positions. This points towards the centrality of political ideologies to their sense of self. Moving beyond ascribed identities, the self-assumed political positions shaped one's worldview and ways of operating. This was reflected in the nuances of ideas and beliefs, and how they are practised – as Ambedkarites, Periyarist, Phule-Ambedkarite, feminists, intersectional feminists, etc.

iii. Participants' relationship with feminism

Every participant had a unique relationship with feminism. However, when it came to identifying themselves as feminists, there were several opinions. Deniz, an Adivasi transwoman, argued against the tendency to define and solidify feminism as an identity, and instead focusing more on the values and principles.

> **Why do we need the tag?** It is more important to understand whether people follow feminist values or not, **whether they practise these principles** or not. I do believe in feminist values; it is not that I don't. I do try to live my life by those values. But in public, I do not call myself a feminist. My reasons are primarily … **what has happened with transwomen, with Adivasi women by savarna feminists.** I do operate and function on feminist principles and values, but I do not call myself feminist cause (sic) **there is so much dhokha** (betrayal) that feminism has done to Adivasi women, there is a lot of dhokha that feminism has done to transwomen. I really do not relate with it … I draw my feminism from my mother's life, I draw my feminism from my grandmothers' lives.

This prioritisation of values and principles was also raised by several participants who identified themselves as feminists. For them, the fact that they followed feminist values and principles was the reason they called themselves feminist. Further,

Humaira (25, a labour rights activist) and Mythili (34, feminist activist), both women, brought up the questions of class and caste. Even though Mythili deliberately identifies as an intersectional feminist to acknowledge the specificities of intersectional oppression, she noted that "feminism in the truest sense is intersectional, otherwise it is no feminism at all". However, "I am still always called a Dalit feminist. Always brought down to that", she says.

> "*feminism in the truest sense is intersectional, otherwise it is no feminism at all*"

On the other hand, Humaira focused on class politics within the feminist movement, and asserted what it meant to her to believe in feminism.

> I feel **feminism is not only for middle class women** ... every woman who works on the farm, who works in a company, who works by a stove – **if it is their struggle for freedom, then I am a feminist**. I feel that there are so many debates and so many ideologies, if they remain only within the confines of Zoom, if we are debating and discussing only inside a Zoom meeting, then it is not okay ... Women need to come forward. How long can we watch ourselves being reduced to objects? Everyone knows what is and what isn't ... When do we speak up for our own dignity? What is our dignity? Is it just about going around in vehicles or eating good food in cities, and enjoying being in public? This cannot be all that is there for freedom. **My dignity is every woman's dignity**. I am a woman myself. It is necessary that women organise and form organisations, and work for them. There should be a proper movement.

Participants held sentimental, reflexive relationship with their identity as feminists. Claiming the tag of feminist was considered a deeply personal act of resistance, that required constant reflection and willingness to change. This is precisely the reason Srutija, 34, a climate justice activist calls herself a baby feminist.

> I don't know whether I can call myself a feminist, **I myself have biases which I have not resolved**. I don't know, at times I feel that I will be very hypocritical if I call myself a feminist. I am trying to be one, you know, I am taking my baby steps. In being a feminist, I will say a that I am not even young, I am a baby. So I am learning a lot, so I will say that yes, a baby feminist learner maybe? I would like to call myself that.

Male participants however struggled to articulate their relationship to feminism. They expressed confusion over what it means to engage with feminism – should one call oneself a feminist or be an ally to the feminist struggle? This question overwhelmingly dominated discussions on feminism during interviews with men. Women participants pondered over the meaning of feminism as applicable to their life, work, and politics. Interviews with men on the other hand raised questions whether it was appropriate to even label themselves as feminist. This indicates that irrespective of these participants practising with feminist values, their idea of feminism largely remained as a women's movement, often raising the question – who can speak for whom?

Having said that, the cautiousness with which the subject was broached revealed a sense of willingness to work through one's own biases.

> **I wish I could be a good feminist, but I know that is a very difficult thing to be.** You can … anyone can be a feminist … everyone can understand feminism. But in practice, to become [a] practical feminist, it is very difficult and that will not come suddenly. It will come only if you want to become [a] feminist like Periyar. It requires much [more] experience and much [more] understanding about society. **I am trying my best to be a practical feminist.**
>
> *Kevin, 29, social justice activist*

Male participants, as we see in the case of Kevin, stressed on the importance of practising feminist values in their personal and political lives. This reflects a sense of acknowledgement of gendered privileges, and openness to interrogating one's own power. This reflection plays an important role in the shaping of the environment in which these young activists 'do' their activism.

Participants' context of activism

Before delving into the insights on leadership and feminism which forms the crux of this enquiry, let us look at youth activism closely. The current ecosystem of youth movements cannot be understood in isolation of the larger political backdrop. Living through the third year of the pandemic, globally, see an increasing dominance of right-wing politics, rising inequalities, political conflicts, and wars, along with severe consequences of climate crisis wreaking havoc on lives of several millions of people. Closer home, the economy appears to be suffering, while inequality has increased manifold over the recent past. The 2022 World Inequality Report classifies India as "a poor and very unequal country, with affluent elite", where "the top 10 per cent and top 1 per cent hold respectively 57 percent and 22 percent of total national income, and the bottom 50 percent share has gone down to 13 percent" (World Inequality Database, 2022).

For a country steeped in generational oppression and inequities along the lines of caste, gender, class, religion and other fault lines, the rise of Hindu majoritarian politics spelled crescendo of the brewing crisis. Starting from 2016, consequent to the institutional murder of Rohit Vemula, a research scholar at University of Hyderabad, there has been growing mobilisation among students, even amidst the violent backlash from the State. By late 2019, the cumulative rage spilled onto the streets as anti-protests CAA-NRC erupted across the country. While pandemic led to disruption of large-scale mobilisation, the state apathy towards marginalised communities have continued, along with severe political repression of all kinds of dissent (Freedom House, 2021).

The political journeys of the participants are rooted within this context. Here, we read about how young people enter movement spaces, the context of their work, their perception, and experience of activism. This section lays out the lived realities on which the participants' relationship and experience with leadership and feminism are based.

i. Context of activism

While the above outlined political climate forms the macro-level backdrop to the participant's activism, there are certain micro-contexts that need to be understood. Youth activism is embedded in the context of resistance to the historical oppression of marginalised communities. Several participants spoke of the exclusion they have faced owing to their identity(ies) of caste, religion, gender, or sexuality. Here, activism was an assertion against their exclusion and erasure from both political spaces and the mainstream. It was seen that activism is anchored in resistance against the larger structures and institutions, and not merely in individuals or events.

Further, the local and regional level political scenario and one's own social location influences the nature of activism.

> For instance, Shyam who has been involved in various movements argues that post 2016, policing and state brutality has increased exponentially. It has become difficult to get permits for events; too many restrictive norms have been introduced in universities to curb political activism; and students – especially ones from the margins – are bearing the brunt of State backlash. The situation has only worsened since the anti-CAA movement began.

Everyday practices and strategies also shift according to contextual needs, which differs across the country. Another aspect that decides the nature of work is the participants' organisational and political affiliations. Different spaces have different modes of operation and their own language of activism. Hence, let us briefly understand the organisational contexts the participants represent.

Participants engaged with and were part of various kinds of organisations. They either were founders or worked with NGOs or collectives, members of political parties, union activists, student leaders, or members of various international/national forums. However, association with organisations also evolves over time. As people evolve, they move out of organisations or choose other modes of operation.

Most often organisations are a core part of the participants' support system. Some participants also however talked about the exclusion and discrimination they faced within organisations they were part of. Such experiences pushed the participants

to rethink their politics and gravitate towards organisations that they resonated with. Further, due the complication with formal registrations, and primarily as a political position against the hierarchical structure of NGOS, some participants operated through collectives.

> I want to talk about NGOs. That approach will not work in our context. The work is so diverse that if we have a template, it will not work. NGOs also only will work if there is funding. **But we need to keep doing the work irrespective of funding, and we will find alternatives**. And with NGOs also comes a **rigid structure, and lack of sharing of power** ... With sharing of power also comes **sharing of ownership** [of] the work. With NGOs, it is primarily that this is my work and this is NGOs work. And I am doing this work to get my salary. That way of work does not sit well with me. Of course, I would love for the work that we are doing to get funded and that we have money. But not work for the money.
>
> *- Deniz, 31, Adivasi rights activist.*

Working within NGO spaces does come with its own challenges. Participants report that due to fear of political targeting and loss of funding, NGOs limit direct involvement in politics. Further, NGO spaces are also driven by the politics of the funders, which comes with its own limitations. Most participants simultaneously engaged with multiple kinds of organisations in different capacities. They agreed on the importance of organisations over individuals. When Anbu, 32, a disability rights activist, started out, he believed that individuals drove organisations. However, through experiences he came to realise –

> ... the importance of having organisations that are supremely disciplined and organised, definitely which gives some space for individuals ... [I] have increasingly realized the importance of having discipline in [an] organisation ... This was extremely unlike me a few years ago ... Social movements and civil society organisations while being and remaining in the realm of civil society should have some organisational forms. If you don't have that, you are going to be a

> flyway operator ... You have to have a sustainable activist organisation, you need to understand how organisations work. This is something I realized off late.

The shift from individual-centric activism was oft-repeated in participants' narratives. We delve more into participants' argument in favour of prioritising organisation over individuals in later sections.

ii.   Foray into activism

Similar to the nature of activism, one's entry into movement spaces or beginning of their political journey is also dependent on one's social location and political contexts. While every participant had their own distinct experience of politicisation, there were certain commonalities. Certain participants traced their politicisation to political events or experience of oppression in their lives.

> For instance, Salma, 28, an independent artist and feminist lawyer, grew up witnessing riots from a very young age. This drew her into social change work from an early age.

> For Shyam, 26, a transman and social justice activist, instances of caste discrimination were the cause for initiation into political consciousness.

Early entry into movement spaces was also seen among participants whose families were also involved in politics or activism

> Humaira, 25, recounts attending union meeting with her parents from an early age and being exposed to humiliation of exploitation of workers, especially women labourers. This stoked her interest in labour and union politics and eventual role as a young community leader.

Others like Mythili felt that activism was the most intuitive course available to her given her family background and early exposure to the social justice movement.

> For me, the **personal is political, and the political is personal** in every sense. I was **born into a family of activists**. Both my parents are part of the social justice movement. In some sense, **I didn't know anything better, and I chose this path because from a very young age, while growing up, I was sensitised to issues that my parents worked on**. My mother is a Dalit feminist, my dad is a labour activist. In some sense, this was a natural course. Also, while growing up, in my teens, I read extensively about social justice leaders such as Babasaheb Ambedkar, Savitribai, and Periyar, and that sort of instilled in me a deep sense of commitment towards the social justice cause.
>
> *- Mythili, 34, feminist activist.*

Entry into movement spaces is tied to access – to the 'right' spaces, to 'right' people, to 'right' opportunities, at the opportune time. For some participants, intergenerational wealth and social-cultural capital also facilitated their entry into social change work, often initially through altruistic or volunteer activities, or reading. Many participants began engaging with politics and movements during their time in universities or campuses, highlighting the importance of safe educational spaces that enable critical thinking. Engagement with NGOs was also a route through which young people, especially ones that lacked access to other political spaces, entered movement spaces. However, it is important to note that universities or NGOs often act as a space for young people to master the language to articulate injustices. Participants report that these spaces acted as a catalyst for their awakened consciousness vis-à-vis social justice.

iii.   Perception of activism

It is within the above mentioned context that we must understand the participants' perception of activism. Engagement with movements was often considered inevitable given the circumstances the participants lived through. Participants

coming from marginalised groups plainly stated that they were part of various social justice movements because the intersection of their identities demand a change in the social status quo. They perception of activism is firmly rooted in the injustices occurring because of their social locations – activism to them is about inalienable human rights.

Some others, however, are uncomfortable with the term activism. Deniz, for instance, argued that the framework of 'community responsibility' better captured the essence of their activism with workers in tea gardens. This framework, according to them, underlines the commitment to the community, and a sense of shared power and responsibility. They explain 'community responsibility' as –

> The way I describe my work is more of **community responsibility** than activism. I see it as a responsibility. Now I am connected with these people, and we are working together. I cannot just leave it and go. And it is not just me. The other thing is that the entire work that we are doing, we are doing this as a collective. We contribute to the work in our own capacities. I cannot say I love the term, but I am not against the term activism or activist. Other [activists before me] have done so much - just the gravity and scope of [their] work is [on] another level. I am still a kid somewhere. And it is primarily my journey of decolonization and resurgence that has helped to come to associate with community responsibility more than activism. Community responsibility is responsibility towards the community and towards each other as well. By that I mean, being understanding towards each other's time, towards each other's concerns and nurturing this friendship.

This framework shares several commonalities with other participants' perception of what constitutes activism, irrespective of the difference in the language of articulation. However, participants noted that the rest of the world often had a very different perception about activism. Participants report that people around them often associate activism with altruism and place heavy expectations on the

shoulders of activists. This is also indicative of the failure of existing structures and institutions to support and nurture the wellbeing of communities.

Every participant's relationship with activism evolved over time. The passage of time exposed them to new spaces, new people, new ideologies, and new opportunities – all of which plays a key role in the evolution of one's perception of activism. As time passed, participants also realised the sobering reality of the labour that goes into being an activist. With time, most young people see through the glamorising narratives around activism.

Anbu, 32, a disability rights activist, captures this shift succinctly –

> The glamourous work is the last bit of activism. It is like the last over of a 20-20 cricket match. You might be able to win with the last over, but if you don't put in the rest of the 19 overs, you are not going to reach there. So, you might have to go, for example, on campuses sticking poster after poster after poster on walls. You might have to distribute pamphlet after pamphlet. And yes, you may or may not be the person who is finally standing on the podium, on the day of the event. But if thousands of people turned up for your event, that is not because you are talking. It is because people did stick these posters and distributed pamphlets. These are the things that are often unappreciated. You get a cheer when you talk from the thousand people who came, but in the first place, the thousand people came because they saw ten thousand posters … And I think the final thing, while it is glamorous and cool, can only happen if one puts in the clerical work behind it … It is very important. I realise this now.

If we trace the political journeys of young people, we can see constant changes in terms of strategies, practices, core beliefs, etc. This is indicative of the dynamicity of youth activism and willingness to stay open to constant changes, even if it means rethinking one's own or one's organisational political positions.

We observed that some participants started out their activist journeys by engaging with an issue-based or identity-based movement that had direct impact on their lives (such as experience of casteism or sexism) or through opportunities they received early on to engage with different issues (such as involvement in charity-based work during their schooling). Exposure to people and movements across the spectrum, and engagement with diverse political thoughts helped evolve participants' perception of activism and the nature of work. The political context and needs arising from it also have direct implications on activism. It must be noted that even though such evolution seems inevitable, the process of constant learning and unlearning demands intense labour and intent.

This shift in thought and practice also had implications on the effectiveness of their activism. Participants' willingness to change reflected in their perception of what counts as effective activism. This also meant less rigidity in terms of practice and a space to learn through mistakes and experiences. Ocean, 32, a queer rights activist, spoke to us about their experience of practising a fluid approach to conflicts –

> [Sometimes confrontation is necessary, but] if there are slightly better ways of dealing with [the problem] than confrontation, which [often] leads to sort of bursting-explosions and terrible outcomes like fights ... So yeah, we kind of juggle between being confrontational and being slightly softer. But in both, trying hard enough to at least take a chance to express our point of view. But to be honest, you know, it is not always that we succeed. We fail at times ... It takes sometimes multiple times to really outdo that rule or structure or norms, you know.

The eagerness to learn through practise – both of oneself and others – is something that resonated throughout the conversations. Participants argued that experience of exposing oneself to new and opposing ideas and translating the learning into action is critical for meaningful activism. This included looking critically at their own work and identifying shortcomings. Accessibility was identified as the most important aspect of effective activism. Salma, 28, an artist, spoke about the importance of thinking through the accessibility question when it comes to language –

> If there is one thing that we should learn is how to really make very simple, very effective, very potent campaigns. As intersectional feminists we want to bring forward our agenda and question. It's not going to happen within our bubble. We need to step out of it. We need to engage with everyone; because at the end of the day, you should be able to express your politics without slipping into jargon.

This speaks to the need for rethinking the prominence given to English fluency and one's hold over academic language, irrespective of their actual political practice. Hence it is also a reminder to check our own confirmation biases and engage with differences and diverse perspectives. Another important component of effective activism is rootedness in pleasure and satisfaction derived from work. Moving away from the tendency to fixate on and romanticise pain and suffering, and adopting tools that are relatable and satisfactory, participants thought is an important way to effectively engage with the larger community.

While all participants spoke about feelings of exhaustion and burnout, they agreed on the fact that being able to laugh and have fun with colleagues and friends motivates and sustains them. This shows the importance of rejecting the dominance of rationality (and performative norms around it which frown upon expression of emotions and seeking pleasure) and embracing one's humanity. This also has implications on accessibility. Tools that centre pleasure and well-being and provide space for emotions tend to be more relatable and consequently more successful. However, as Nadhi, 32, a feminist activist rightly points out, building accessible movements also requires resources –

> ... providing training itself is not a very big deal. Accessibility ... it's a bit difficult currently because getting access to Zoom is also ... tough. In rural areas, especially in remote villages, they don't have regular signals or connectivity. It's a challenge but then we have to figure out ways. Maybe the women will all congregate at one place which does have proper connectivity or if they have an office. They would go there and access it through the WiFi. Those are very practical issues we

> face, but these are issues, nonetheless. Creating leaders is something that takes time, that too building that whole cadre of women farmer leaders. That is not going to happen overnight. It is going to take quite a bit of time. But with resources and more focused efforts we will get there. We are trying already, we have been working, we have done that successfully in several areas, but we really need more resources to address the gap in access.

The importance of resources cannot be overstated. Operating within a context riddled with inequities, it is natural that investment in access is going to be resource heavy. However, according to the participants, this is often neglected in the current funding ecosystem. This leads to project-mode work which has no space for questioning the status quo or transforming the system.

Another prerequisite for effective activism is the prioritisation of community/ organisation over individuals. For a movement to be sustainable, participants agree that one must reject the supremacy of individuals and focus on building a space for everyone to grow. This is crucial for the work to sustain even if individuals leave the movement. This also means that commitment to the organisation takes precedence over personal ambitions. Humaira also spoke of the importance of focussing on mobilising and building communities over firefighting with individuals. According to her, for one's organisational work to be successful, one needs to reach out and closely engage with communities since this the only way to ensure that the movement continues. Even if individuals in the movement become indisposed due to unforeseen circumstances, the strength built on the ground can provide effective support.

Deniz, 31, strongly argues that the most basic requirement for effective activism is acknowledging the wisdom of communities.

> It is good that you are working with a community. You could have a lot of reasons to do that. But how ethically are we doing it, how ethically are we engaging with the community – with respect [and] with dignity? Why are we nurturing the understanding that communities

are just suffering and that they do not know anything? That is not the understanding that you want to nurture. That is entirely false. Any community, any marginalised community – the experience of marginalisation is not new. It is a historical experience, and it is not that they have never resisted marginalisation in any way. They have been working on it. We need to understand that.

This calls for breaking down the hierarchy between the activist (often perceived as the saviour) and the community (often perceived as the passive receiver) and reimagine the very definitions of expertise and knowledge by focussing on lived experiences and non-conventional forms of knowledge. This is of key relevance especially in the context of working with marginalised communities, as these communities have historically been excluded from power and the process of knowledge production.

iv.   Community and its meaning

Participants' perception and experience of activism also hinged on their relationship with communities. But what do we mean by communities here? It could be the people that they work and engage with, or more broadly it could be the group of people that they relate to and lean on, but not necessarily work with.

Building healthy communities was also cited as a reason for entering movement spaces. For Srutija, a climate justice activist, community is a space where one feels a sense of belonging. This sense of belonging provides a safe space to learn, unlearn, and relearn effortlessly. Communities, according to her, celebrate one's victories and also guide the individual in case something goes wrong. She sought to create micro-pockets of changes through such communities. In Srujita's understanding of a community, it is not merely a group of passive receivers, but a group that motivates and nurtures an individual through their victories and tribulations.

While some young people spoke of relating to and closely engaging with communities with whom they share identities, few participants had sought out and built their own communities through work, like Deniz. Shared political values however glue people together to form an interdependent community. For instance, Pavan, a Phule-Ambedkarite believes that a strong commitment to de-brahmanisation is what holds his community together.

> So firstly, the community here is the **oppressed**. So, now who is this oppressed? The marginalised castes … like across the **Bahujan groups** i.e., scheduled castes, scheduled tribes, other backward castes, other religious minorities, right? But this evolved as we evolved … my understanding of community [has] **broadened to include oppressed nationalities, even sexual minorities**. So, that way we have broadened our understanding of community and that goes with that universal connotation of oppression, right? Who are oppressed? However, if a savarna comes … I mean upper-caste men or women, if they come and say that "Look, I'm also an Ambedkarite, I also want to associate with your struggle and movement" … yes, we welcome that. We welcome that, what we look at is how they adopted the debrahmanisation process.

Shifting from identity-based association to an association based on shared political commitment and practices paves way for strengthening the movement. However, there are significant roadblocks that one needs to face when it comes to building and engaging with communities, since they are not a monolith. Participants often found it challenging to navigate their relationships with communities while holding positions of power.

29-year-old Mying hails from and works with an indigenous community in Nagaland. She feels that while there are benefits to sharing a common identity with the community, people tend to not take her seriously owing to the familiarity coupled with people's perceptions about her age and gender.

This is something me and my colleagues always talk about. Since I am from that same particular community, though from a different village or block, I am from the same community. You know, I have this feeling that if I was someone from outside of Nagaland, if I was an outsider, maybe I would have not gotten the same treatment, their response towards me would have been different than how it is now. They are **very close to me** in one way, because **we share similar things and characteristics.** In that way, we are very close. They say things like, 'if you had been an outsider, it would have been very difficult for us to work with you.' That is how their response is. But at the same time, I am from their community, and **I feel like they take me for granted. Outsiders are always respected more.**

Similar experiences were also shared by 35-year-old Vaiga who grew through the ranks over years and currently holds the position of Director in an NGO. Being a woman from a marginalised community, she had to go against several conservative norms regarding women's mobility and rights. Even though people have accepted her transgressions of sociocultural norms, she still feels taken for granted by her community.

This resonates with several other women participants. While feminism and active involvement in politics has given them a lot of perks, it comes at a cost. Going against families and community can also be a painful process, ridden with feelings of guilt and loneliness. Hence it becomes even more important to "find pockets of warmth", as Srutija would say. It is the need for community that comes across in Mying's narrative where she seeks to meet people with "shared values and thoughts". This yearning for like-minded people for Mying becomes an exercise in verifying and validating her feelings and actions undertaken during the course of her activism. For instance, she wants to be a group of people who think like her and provide her with assurance, motivation, and solutions as needed.

What we see here is that participants like Mying make a distinction between the kinds of communities. Earlier she described a community as the indigenious community she works with and alongside. Later, she mentions seeking a community of like-minded peers, who could possess what she refers to as the "spectators' or outsiders' point of view". Participants like her make this implicit but important distinction between what constitutes communities; this distinction is not always overtly described but has to be inferred from their narratives. This implies a distinction between the community one works with and the community one seeks, a distinction that often goes unnoticed until specifically probed.

While few participants expressed their concern over lack of feminist communities to lean on, some also spoke of their bitter experiences. They shared instances where they were made to feel that they don't belong, raising pertinent questions about exclusion within movement spaces. Even movement spaces tend to be governed by logic of caste, gender, ableism, and similar structures of power.

Duaa, 25, a feminist activist, hints at the root of the problem here. She and several other participants argue that access to resources and opportunities determine one's abilities. However, this access, they note is often if not always unequal in nature. For instance, there is a clear dominance of English-educated, urban, elite, savarnas – who have intergenerationally held resources – in movement spaces. Unless intentionally dismantled, this hierarchy alienates young people from the margins who enter these spaces. Lack of space for political difference can also be a cause for alienation. Over time, this sense of lack of belongingness discourages people from even engaging with the larger movement.

> I feel that a lot of Muslim women also **do not want to engage** - there are very few who do. Especially the student leaders. We keep talking about this. They do not want to engage because they feel that **feminist organisations are largely left oriented and have no space for religion or identity politics**. This has created a mistrust. I have felt the same. But I also feel that there is no other way but to engage and make space for yourselves.
>
> *- Isai, 29, citizenship rights activist.*

As we saw earlier too, making space for themselves is an important motivation that runs throughout the narrative of young people. This reminds us that building or forming communities is a constantly evolving process that takes grit and effort and cannot be understood if looked at through romanticised ideas of community as a unique structure beyond politics.

v.   Self in relation to activism

Having understood the contexts in which our participants operate, and their perception of what constitutes effective activism, we now look at how they see themselves in relation to their activism.

Despite the diversity of participants in this study, there were certain common threads that emerged when they spoke of their perception of the work that they undertake. Even though their tones shifted from that of slight hesitance to assertion, a clarity of thought regarding one's own politics shone through the narrative. Several participants shied away from owning their individual contribution to the movement. This can be partly attributed to both lack of spaces to reflect on such questions and to gendered values that determine how one perceives oneself. While cis-men found it easier to precisely identify and claim their contribution, other participants expressed their confusion over whether they have done anything of account.

> I have never really thought about it, but I don't think I have done enough to talk about my contribution in that sense. I think in our own ways, each one of us are working towards unravelling the historical injustices that are done to us. We use every opportunity and every forum we get in the country and across the globe to flag these issues and centre stage the discrimination marginalised communities face. I think that this fight for equality can't be linear, it has to be multi-pronged. At every given instinct, I am a flagbearer of the cause, and I do everything in my own little way to highlight these issues and think about possible solutions. We are always trying to work with the powers to be and the local authorities to policymakers. We are always

trying to advocate for changes in policies because we realize that policies that are meant to cater to the Dalit and Adivasis.

Mythili, 34, female, feminist activist.

However, this tendency also needs to be attributed to the politics of considering community/organisation over individuals. The most important contribution of young people to movement spaces are diverse standpoints and knowledge systems. For instance, for Kevin, a chemical engineer and social justice activist, environmental activism is all about bringing his expertise of science into the realm of social change and policy work. Young people from various backgrounds also bring in critical voices into movements –

> My contribution to climate change space is bringing narratives and experiences of trans people and queer people to this conversation. Climate movement is also a space that is dominated by upper-caste people or people from urban spaces. It is an elite space. But experiences of tribal communities and experiences of people from marginalised communities are appropriated and brought up just for tokenism. I am trying to push those conversations into that space. This is what I am contributing to that movement. I don't know if I am contributing much or not.
>
> *- Shyam, 26, transman, social justice activist.*

Here we see that Shyam's political participation in itself is an act of resistance against the erasure of diverse narratives from the climate movement.

Similarly, Vaiga's experience of being a Muslim woman informs her work of building agency of young girls.

My biggest contribution I think is that I could learn from my own experiences and use it to connect with all girls. I understood them, and I was like them. I could mobilise and inspire them with my own stories of the journey of my personal struggles. I come from a Muslim family in [a city in North India] – a community where girls are not sent for much education, girls do not have mobility and women follow purdah. Coming from this context, I could use my experience to understand the local situation and needs of the girls I meet here. So, using both my experience and the needs of local context, I design and implement programs for the NGO. I think this is my biggest contribution.

- Vaiga, 35, female, feminist activist

Participants often felt their role in the movement is that of a bridge between the personal and political. They claim that they constantly learn from their own experiences and use those stories to connect with the people they work with. This builds a shared sense of solidarity, and inspires people to interrogate their own experiences critically, and demand for what they are entitled to.

I feel my contribution has been to let young people know that they can create change at the national, global, and international level. I also feel that I am able to show that gender needn't get in the way of achieving anything. We used to have elections in school for class leaders - and apart from two years, every single year only boys got elected. Because everyone - including girls themselves - believe that girls can't be leaders. So, I feel like I was able to show young people around me that this is not true.

- Nila, 16, female, youth rights activist

When young people, especially the ones who have been denied power and resources structurally, take up space and take ownership of leadership roles, it contributes to rewriting the rules of merit. However, neither the roles nor perception of roles are set in stone. Participants agreed that it is an evolving process, and often also means implementing changes in one's own life.

One's role as an activist also had implications on their lives and involved being open to changes. This self-reflection and willingness to change was identified as a political practice of an activist. Hence being a learner – on a constant quest for learning and unlearning - is also an important reflexive role played by young people within movements. While interacting and engaging with the community you work with is an important aspect of activism, it is also a catalyst for change. It is through closely engaging with diverse perspectives from the community that one's politics and self evolves. In other words, one's role as an activist is not limited to working within a niche of comfort, but involves sitting with uncomfortable reflections, and learning to identify the inequities within the community, and working on it. Such crucial work is not possible without a tenacious support system, and a strong anchor of principles.

It is their belief in certain principles that shape the nature and nuances of participants' perception and practice of activism. The principles named by participants include – social justice, constitutional values, feminism, equality, equity, inclusion, empathy, accountability, credibility, sharing of power, work ethics, and commitment (see Image 1). Even though expressed in different languages, we can see that the principles that anchor the

participants' work is similar to the basic principles of feminist leadership. This implies that even if the participants do not identify themselves as feminist leaders, their practice is rooted in the tenets of feminist leadership. However, we will discuss this further in the later section where we discuss young people's perceptions of leadership.

vi. Support system

Along with principles, support systems also play an important role in enabling social change work. Participants depended on a range of support systems to navigate movement spaces. At an individual level, participants depended on their intimate circle – family and friends, mentors, and mental health care providers for support. They also benefited from access to the internet – through which they could gain network and knowledge, and fellowships or grants that provided resources which enabled their work.

Women activists who often find themselves in the media's limelight, credited their family as being their biggest support system. They stressed on the importance of domestic and care work support as being critical for activists. Many kinds of labour go into sustaining a movement, both familial and non-familial. Not all women activists found familial support.

> Now that we are talking about it, whatever that we do, the one support we crave the most is the support from our family members. Maybe it is because of the bond we have been sharing since the time of birth. But sometimes my parents refuse to understand the work I do. They do not support when I work on something that goes in opposition to their belief. At that time, I feel I am at my lowest and the weakest. Because, you are already fighting the world and the system that is going on, but then you are also fighting the two people who you thought would understand you but don't.
>
> *- Aditi, 23, feminist activist.*

Aditi's anguish over lack of support from her parents is shared by several participants. In these cases, it was often **chosen families or friends** that came to support in such scenarios. Participants stressed on the respite friendships bring into their lives. Talking, laughing, having fun, and spending time together energised them to no end. Friend circles were also spaces to discuss ideas, informally strategise, and learn.

Mentorship was identified as another source of support by most participants. They picked up skills and learned the ropes of the system from various mentors. Given the lack of formal mentorship opportunities, young people seek out mentors from the movement spaces or communities. Rather than solutions, mentorship offered participants a space to be and unravel, and revive hope. As Anbu says, sometimes you need people *"to tell you that politics is an exhausting, tiring process, and you can't expect quick results"*. This emotional support often protects young people from losing hope.

If we look at the macro-context, at times, the **political context** itself can be a source of support for young leaders. For instance, the recent attempts by the UN to develop a strong cadre of young leaders have resulted in creating a welcoming space for younger adults, who were otherwise excluded from such spaces, especially in fields of climate action and gender equality.

Further, participants also drew support from **different movements through solidarity and collaboration**. Operating in a context where resources are far and few, young leaders relied on the solidarity between movement spaces to access critical support. Such collaborations help activists to cross the barriers posited by lack of funding or formal registration, as we see in Deniz's case below –

> For the collective, we do not have finances, we do not have money. We wanted to roll out an internship, so that kids from our community can work with us. But since we are not registered, we cannot issue certificates. We talked to an organisation, networked with them. They agreed to design the work together and provide certificates to the interns. They loved the work so much that they even mobilised a lump sum amount to compensate the interns.

Networks formed the most important support system according to the participants. It was through networks that one gained exposure to diverse people, opportunities, mentorships, etc. This is true even when the experience gained through engaging with the network is not directly political work, such as Aditi's engagement with the church group.

> As I was growing up, I used to be so much involved with church activities, student union activities. Within our community, we have our own student union. I am the education secretary in the union as well. So, I was so much involved in working with the church. When you are working with the church, you are always like up there on the stage – singing, dancing, putting out a speech, hosting something, etc. Also, they have different small programs where they give orientation to leaders as well. So even when I was in college, while I was away from home as well, we had our community church in that area. There they used to give us the leadership orientation program. It was not like something formal, but then to be used in church. But then I think these things have moulded me. These things and experiences have always been a support factor for me. I know I can always count on these people and skills anywhere I go, even if my politics is different from a lot of people there.
>
> *- Aditi, 23, female, feminist activist.*

Organisations also were identified as a core pillar of support to several participants. Participants also derive collective strength from their **own communities**. Especially when faced with state repression, and systemic exclusion, and marginalisation, both within and outside movement spaces, young people turn to their own communities for support.

When we delve on support systems, it brings us the **question of access**. Like in the case of every other resource, access to support is also contingent on one's social location. Lack of support mechanisms reflect the replication of oppressive structures and practises within movement spaces, and this requires serious introspection. Anbu speaks about his own experience of navigating access as a blind, savarna, English-educated, cisman.

> I think simply by the virtue of my ability to speak fluent English has given me access to a lot of people. But then, I grew up in an able-bodied school. I grew up as an upper caste individual. This has definitely given me a lot of confidence to call up someone and talk to them and all that. I think as a man with a disability, I have been able to travel around a little bit more [than other disabled individuals]. I think all of this has definitely given me much more access to support systems.
>
> But like I said, sometimes it is very funny. For example, they say that a smile can talk more than a hundred words. So many times, I feel that I miss out on many connections, many access [points] because I can't look at people and smile. Especially when you are in protest meetings and all that, people make connections by looking and smiling and all that. The ability to walk up to someone and realise that the person is standing there so that I can walk up to them. I don't have these opportunities. So that has hindered my access to support and network at many levels. But one compensates for that in various ways by assuming leadership positions, so on and so forth. So that you are seen as someone with whom everyone wants to talk. So that's a way to overcome that handicap of not being able to access that.

Other participants like Isai argue that even if one is to gain access to networks and spaces, the marginalisation still follows. Entry into spaces does not often guarantee support, leaving young leaders helpless. They either must operate without any support or have to abide by the oppressive norms within the space. The same sentiment of concern was seen throughout the participants' narratives. The current political climate has made it difficult and even dangerous for young people to engage in movements, making the participation of youth extremely critical at this juncture. Hence support systems that can enable activism are critical. Participants remind us of the need to invest resources and energy on building support systems, we must remember that support must be structural and institutionalised rather than one-off or individualised. Only then can it lead to sustainable results.

Thoughts on leadership

In this section, we look at young people's relationship with leadership. Here we have try to understand their perception and experience of leadership, motivations to take on leadership roles, self-identified impact of their leadership, and challenges they face as young leaders.

i. Perception of leadership

Participants' perception of leadership often shifted over time and with due engagement with the movement space. Most participants, especially, non-male participants told us that they rarely aspired to occupy leadership positions. The mantle of leadership was entrusted to them by people around.

Women participants, despite occupying leadership roles in their own areas of activism, often shirked away from owning the title of 'leader'. This can be read as a reflection of remnants of internalised gendered socialisation that teaches women to shrink themselves and not take up space. However, they themselves acknowledged this internalisation as the conversation went on. Male participants were more comfortable in identifying themselves as leaders.

Humaira, a woman activist, for instance, stresses on her belief that movement participants who work hard are chosen as leaders by others within the movement. She says –

> To tell the truth, I never thought that I would become a leader ... But what's inside me is that I get involved with the public. So, I mean, I was not in any position. I had not even joined any organisation – I was just independently working – going to people's houses at night, gathering everyone in the morning and joining the protest, raising slogans, giving speeches, singing songs, doing everything. People choose people whom they recognise and choose them as their leader. They did the same with me, I didn't know that people would make me a leader. Faces of the movement are born like this.
>
> *- Humaira, 25, labour activist.*

Despite the gendered differences in claiming a leadership title, participants largely identified leadership as a site of constant negotiation. Being a leader meant that one is in constant tussle with the state and authorities, organisations, communities, and the self. As a leader, one finds themselves at the receiving end of scrutiny from every side. Even while one believes in certain ideologies, the practicality of social change work is arduous and is not straightforward. Participants report that they need to constantly negotiate with conflicts arising from any particular situation to reach amiable solutions. This involves engaging with people who do not see eye to eye with your politics, making calculative choices according to short-term and long-term goals, patiently working through conflicts and differences with communities, and being open to self-reflection and yet standing your ground when it comes to taking strategic decisions. Often their experience of being a leader went contrary to their perception of what it means to be a leader.

The adulation received by leaders resulted in them feeling lonely in the pedestals others built for them. For Humaira, for instance, being venerated as a leader was

a humbling experience, even though her motivation to inspire people is rooted in her own unfulfilled aspiration to pursue higher education. The participants feel that leadership came with the expectation of perfection. They struggle with the pressure of living up to the expectations in terms, for instance, always taking the right decisions, shaping the discourse, and constantly engaging with mass media.

The pressure to be perfect is also internalised, pushing participants towards further self-improvement. The internalised pressure and loneliness combined with conflicting external factors often means that the young leaders are constantly in a 'firefighting' mode.

Participants also raised the question of identities when it comes to access to leadership roles. Citing the erasure of the contributions of Bahujan artists and writers such as Gaddar from the discourse of the Telangana movement, Anil, an anti-caste activist says –

> Leadership isn't all about a leader's words and their planning. It is also supported by the culture around it, supported by the people around it, and supported by many resources around it. Hence, I strongly believe that there can't be a single leader in a given setting.

Despite putting in labour, often activists hailing from marginalised communities were excluded from power positions.

Pavan argues that exclusion of certain people from leadership roles has to do with how people equate certain masculine-savarna norms to leadership attributes. People choose leaders they resonate with; participants involved in student rights for instance point out that University spaces are usually dominated by savarnas in leadership positions.

Mythili argues that all movement spaces are dominated by young people from certain dominant caste communities.

When movement spaces replicate the systems of oppression they intend to dismantle, there is a dire need to re-examine the structures that favour power over certain groups over others. Participants shared that they often felt alienated in movement spaces. Especially within feminist movement spaces, senior activists held tremendous power over others. Resources and opportunities were passed through caste-class networks. Duaa points out that such assumptions about leaders and leadership are built into languages too.

> I have questions about the word 'leadership' (Nayakatva) itself! Due to the prevalence of patriarchy, the social construction of words is thus. There is a term for 'leadership' in English. But we say 'Nayaka' (Male leader) and 'Nayaki' (Female leader) in Kannada. That means, there is no neutral word for 'leadership' in Kannada. We are supposed to use 'Mundalatva' which a very loose synonym for leadership instead of 'Nayakatva', if I want to talk about leadership. But it doesn't mean the same..
>
> *- Duaa, 26, feminist activist.*

Being a leader hence also meant navigating savarna-masculine tropes of power and leadership and carving out space for oneself and their community. On the other hand, we also saw that for participants who were born into social capital, acknowledgement of privileges and critical reflection on one's own positionality was a crucial aspect of leadership.

Participants seemed to employ an intersectional approach to shaping their course as a leader. In Nadhi's case this meant that she deliberately identified herself as a youth facilitator who is working to safeguard the rights of women farmers.

> I consider myself a youth facilitator. I don't think I should lead specifically on the issues of rural women. I feel they themselves should be leading and putting forward their own demands and formulating the agenda. I don't want to be the one necessarily formulating the agenda. The agenda should be something that comes organically

> from the women farmers themselves. Their demand should be coming from the women farmers themselves.

- Nadhi, 32, feminist activist.

A nuanced understanding of power and solidarity underlies the participants' approach to leadership. Here, leadership implies putting one's resources and labour into use to aid in creating an enabling ecosystem for marginalised communities to formulate and raise their own demands. Other women participants working with marginalised groups also adopted similar approaches to leadership.

Collaboration and shared leadership anchor participants' approach to leadership. We also see an important distinction being made between designation and power-sharing in an organisation. Even while holding a position that nominally places one in a superior position within the organisational hierarchy, it is the politics of the organisation that shapes the model of power-sharing and the nature of leadership within the organisation. This approach that seems to work within a collective, however, might not be directly permissible within organisational structures.

For example, Vaiga spoke to us about her experience of holding a leadership position within an NGO. In the organisation that works on building young women's leadership skills, Vaiga started out as a trainer and rose the ranks and currently holds a directorial role. While she staunchly believes in non-hierarchal leadership, in reality, she feels it is a tricky territory for her.

> Usually in other organisations, Directors come from certain communities ... and ... education ... I don't fit into that idea. I had to work harder [than most] to make that space [for myself]. Since I have a similar background [as that of the girls I work with], I can connect with everyone. But this is also dangerous. I have the responsibility of handling the organisation. In most organisations, Directors have a separate cabin. You need to take appointments to meet them. They

sit behind closed doors. Here we have nothing like that. They can come to me anytime. And I like it this way, it should be this way. I can't be soft to anyone. I am answerable to the organisation; I need to send in monthly reports of what was done and what not. I cannot let it go if people do not work or if they keep coming in late or things like that. They expect me to let go all this and get upset with me. But I need to prove that I am a good Director also. This means something to my community, the girls.

- Vaiga, 35, feminist activist.

When people from marginalised communities assume leadership positions, they seem to face much more scrutiny and pressure. On one hand, they need to struggle to establish themselves and make space for themselves in a setting otherwise dominated by people carrying the medals of intergenerational privileges. On the other hand, they also need to establish boundaries with their own community members who can take them for granted.

We are again reminded of the question of who is readily accepted as a leader and who is not. According to most participants, being accepted as leaders is not so much a function of leadership skills, but their identities. They report that one's caste, gender, class, ethnicity, sexuality, religion, age, disability, even physical appearances, and hold over languages determines how they were perceived and treated by others.

The question of representation is even more complicated in certain other cases. For example, can a university educated, English speaking, upper middle-class woman belonging to a minority community lead all women belonging to the very community? Even though there are no easy answers, participants expressed genuine confusion over such practical aspects of power and leadership and wished for spaces to collectively engage with and think through such questions rather than continuously firefight.

ii. Attributes of leadership

The following are the factors that participants believe makes someone a leader – a true leader operates from a strong value system. The values, according to the participants are:

accountability   empathy   humility   conviction   commitment

courage   trustworthiness   groundedness   respect for everyone   care

A leader, according to most interviews, must be a good listener, ready to work towards common goals and benefits, and rise within the ranks organically. It is also important to root one's leadership and activism on the ideals of social justice and constitutional values and practise an intersectional approach.

Participants agreed that a leader must possess knowledge. However, this knowledge could be derived from reading or from their lived experiences. Experience of engaging with specific contexts or knowledge of the context is of supreme importance if one is to work within the context. Few skills that were attributed to leadership are – problem solving, innovation, time management, planning and resource management, identifying contextual needs, and effective communication. A leader is expected to come up with ideas and be vocal about the cause they represent across mass media.

A leader is also expected to provide thought leadership. This involves thinking ahead of the curve and designing a long-term vision for the movement. Through this, participants argue, a leader provides shape and direction to the cause. Most importantly, a leader must push the envelope – they must not succumb to the status quo and actively pursue radical shifts within existing structures. Further, some participants stress that a leader must be always willing to take up menial, everyday tasks such as writing and distributing pamphlets, maintaining accounts, etc. One is also expected to prioritise the organisation and/or the movement over individuals' affiliations to build space for members' growth and progress. All participants, unequivocally, highlighted the importance of leaders practising the ideals that they preach.

iii.   Self-identified impact of leadership

As we spoke to the participants about their perception of the impact of their leadership, we saw glimpses of the principles that they dearly held and practised, and challenges faced. Several participants felt that the biggest impact they made is the space they could create for their community or the causes they represent, fighting against an exclusionary system. Several participants worked closely on issues that were rarely spoken of or were actively silenced or neglected. Through their engagement, the participants felt that they could contribute to creating a discourse on the issue.

Further, it was also seen that the discourse that the young leaders created were potent enough to inspire action from other young people.

> As Srutija beautifully articulates, a leader really becomes a leader when another person starts following them.

Being able to inspire others into action was hence cited as an important impact youth activism had. Involvement of young people in movements also enabled them to assume the role of a critical pressure group that can impact the regional politics, as seen in the case of various student movements.

Being a leader also affected the personal lives of young people in several ways. As the lines between the personal and the political are often blurred, the principles that guided their activism were what shaped their personal lives. Duaa, for instance, feels strongly that introduction to the tenets of feminism brought her freedom.

> I am leading an independent life. Since I completed my education, I got the opportunity to work elsewhere. That was not possible all these years. After [I started working in this organisation], I have been living independently ... There have not been many changes in my house. I have become independent, is all. I voice my needs, I make my own decisions, I buy clothes of my choice. I have been in my house all my life. When I moved out, they did not like the idea a lot. They

> questioned why I needed to move out and work elsewhere. Now that I know how to speak to them, I have earned my independence. My personal life has seen changes.

Involvement in movement spaces also impacted the inter-personal relationships of young people. While for some, it meant gaining respect from their family and friends, for others, it meant having to fight with their families for their own rights.

> Generally, growing up, I had few blind friends. But now that I have interacted with a few people who have done well in life as blind and visually impaired people, they've also become my friends, whom I call for non-work purposes as well, with whom I go for drinks. I never did all this. So definitely that kind of interpersonal relationship developed through activism. And activism also had an influence on my inter-personal relationship with my family because there are certain things that the family demanded, and because as an activist I thought it is non-agreeable, and I could not do it. Both ways, activism gave me some inter-personal relationships, and interpersonal relationships were also influenced by activism. It worked both ways.

Being a leader also brought in people – friends, comrades, community, as we see in the case of Anbu. However, young people in movement spaces also seem to be yearning for communities. Mying, for instance is seeking to be part of a feminist community to receive knowledge, guidance, suggestions, and general course-correction in their personal and professional spheres.

As a feminist leader one goes through constant tussles with oneself and the people around, both being government by societal norms. Having a community that shares your values and commitment to the movement is essential to navigate the muddy waters of political journeys. However, Georgie is of the opinion that things work differently in the realm of electoral politics. Owing to the rigidity of a feudal mindset

when it comes to politics, people often return favour or help with unconditional trust and affection. However, this carefully curated image of the leader doesn't always mean well.

Participants felt that their engagement in movement spaces affected their intimate relationships, as the former takes up a large share of their time, leaving them with very little energy and time for others. The shrinking space for dissent also has managed to rupture relationships as people are getting increasingly anxious to associate publicly with young leaders who are vocal against the status quo. Public trolling and threat of violence that comes with publicly taking a political stance further worsens the situation.

Trolling, in the case of 20-year-old Varsha, a climate change activist, has affected her mental health. The internet's ubiquitous nature often means that not only does she face harassment from those who disagree with her, but so do her friends and family. This causes strain on her personal life, with people distancing themselves from her, thereby shrinking her support system. Moreover, she shares her experience of being in the limelight –

> I am also feeling imprisoned [because of fame]. Wherever I go people recognise me as that person who was jailed and trolled badly. Frankly, my interaction with the community has become limited after I became the face of the movement. People used to feel comfortable to share their thoughts with me, but once you become a popular face, people talk to you very carefully. This limits the conversation. People just keep telling me that they consider me a leader, etc. When the spotlight falls on you, the issues get diluted. People keep calling me their leader, but I am also a victim of this system. I don't know whether I should be a victim or a leader. And there are so many restrictions on how to speak, what to speak … becoming a leader and basking in fame also meant having to put in more efforts to improve oneself, and not let down the people who look up to you for inspiration.

Relatively younger participants also report that people in their age group are often surprised at their achieving or gaining leadership roles. This often serves as an inspiration for their peers to join the movement. For young people, seeing their contemporaries engage in leadership work was an invitation to embark on their own journeys.

Thoughts on feminism

As mentioned in the earlier section, participants had distinct relationships with feminism. They came to know of feminism as an ideology at different points of time through various channels, articulate feminism differently and draw different learnings from the ideology. This section looks at how people come to know of feminism, the lessons they draw from feminism, the ways in which identities shape their politics, and experience of being part of and leading different movements.

i.   Familiarity with feminist principles

All participants retrospectively talked about their resistance to gender-based discrimination and them questioning gendered practices from a young age within their own contexts. It is important here to keep in mind the distinction between knowing/practising feminist principles, and feminist theory, the knowledge of which is steeped in the English language and framed largely by academia in the Global North. For instance, Deniz shares -

> … sharing power and communities [having] wisdom, are part of feminist principles. Even though I don't use the word feminism … the politics of language itself needs attention. And that is something that organisations like UN Women should be mindful of. It is not necessary that everyone knows the word "feminism". And what bigger organisations like UNW can do is … how do people or what are the words that people are using for themselves. Even with these same principles, you need to know how people articulate them in their own ways. In Hindi, we call it Narivaad. Naarivad is also a very heavy

term which many communities, many people do not even know its meaning. You should understand how people express feminist values, and how they practise it, and build upon that and nurture that.

- Deniz, 31, transwoman.

Several participants were introduced to feminist discourse during their time at University, or engagement with NGOs. Apart from these, their knowledge building took place through exposure to activist and academic networks; many participants developed their own understanding by proactively seeking literature on feminism and reading it. This gave them a language to articulate their politics in the language of academia. However, this was more than often, not their first encounter with feminist thought.

First time I came across the term 'feminist', the first time I read the definition about feminist, feminist groups, was when I was in school. I think I was in class 8th or 9th. I read about that in my social studies textbook. But I feel, even before that, I was developing to be like that. When I read that definition or lines, I could identify myself with that. I could feel … this is it. This is the word I have been searching for. That is how I came to know about feminism. But then as I grew up, I learnt about it, I was in the learning process because there are so many jargons that we have, there are so many keywords I don't know about them.

- Aditi, 23, feminist activist.

It is important to remember here that Aditi had access to the English language and feminist literature at an earlier stage in life, relative to many of our participants. Several participants, especially those from rural communities, had relatively low access to both the English language and feminist literature. For instance, Humaira's journey of discovering feminism was markedly different from that of Aditi.

> Many people have given their whole life to the movement. Today their names are not [prominent]. No one knows them at all, but they left their home, did so much work for the people, sacrificed so much. I have learnt everything from them ... I never took any class [on feminism] ... I didn't do any study - that means I have not been taught what Marxism is or anything. I've now started understanding things. But the thoughts that are there, the practical things I have seen, I have learnt more from that.

- Humaira, 25, female, labour rights activist.

Humaira's engagement with feminism was also rooted in her engagement with Marxism. The feminist icons one held close to their heart changed according to the way they encountered feminist consciousness. While for some it was Arundhati Roy, Simone De Beauvoir, and Kamla Das, for some it was Ambedkar and Periyar, while for some it was their mothers and grandmothers. The icons are reflective of one's political positions and level of access to English education and feminist literature. Young people who were introduced to feminism through formal learning setup found their icons in popular feminist writers. Few participants derived their feminism from the women in their lives – reflecting a deliberate attempt to reject colonial knowledge systems and acknowledge the feminist values that one's foremothers espoused in their everyday lives.

Even participants who did not identify themselves as feminists, reported that they were introduced to tenets of feminist principles and intersectionality by the works of leaders who are not considered "feminist leaders", such as Ambedkar, Phule, or Periyar. This reinforces the centrality of intersectionality in feminist thoughts. An understanding of gendered oppression and oppressive systems cannot be separated from other systems of oppression. Therefore, young people discover feminism through other ideologies. We discuss more about intersectionality in the coming sections.

ii.   Lessons from feminism

Despite the differences in meanings associated to feminism, all participants shared that feminist principles have in one way, or another influenced their work. These participants witnessed a gradual evolution in their understanding of feminism. More often than not, their initial idea of feminism involved comprehending the world through issues such as 'girls' education', 'women empowerment', etc. Engaging with literature and other people resulted in a more evolved understanding of feminism as an intersectional theory and movement addressing topics beyond gender discrimination, to include discrimination based on other intertwined identities of caste, class, religion, race, ethnicity, disability, region, language, colour, etc.

The impact of feminist principles was not limited to the realm of political work. Participants felt that feminism helped them critically understand their personal experiences and identify injustices meted out to them and people around, owing to their identities.

> If you look at the principles of feminism, as a woman when you are growing up, you go through a lot of experience yourself, when you are made to feel low as a girl, the first time that you get menstruation, and when you are inappropriately touched by strangers in public places, people try to harass you, or when your every action is controlled by your family norms. As [women], we grew up learning that this is normal because this is how a good woman should behave. We are asked to be the ideal good woman. But as we grow and with experiences, we realise that that's not true. It's rather the opposite.
>
> I read a lot about feminism [as a student of Economics and History], about women's rights, the timeline. When we were doing rural development, [I] used to read stories of different women, I slowly began to understand that the struggle is age-old. I did not know much about patriarchy then either. I used to feel that this way of

doing things was right. But then again slowly I realised why it was wrong. Later when we started working with women, our perspective changed … we have seen our grandmothers and mother and our own self being subjected to the same.

- Pallavi, 36, female, feminist activist.

The participants' journeys with feminism was in constant flux involving learning and unlearning. Feminist ideology offers the lens to bring out the political in the personal, and critically understand how power operates in different spaces and relationships. This lens has been used to strengthen different movements and causes. As Anbu, a 34 year old, disability activist told us,

As I evolved or tried to evolve, I realised a lot of intersections and tangential points with the feminist movement. To start with, both have a lot to do with the diversity in the body. That was the starting point. I also realized that a lot of lessons from feminism could work for disability rights as well … the personal is political. For example, if something is inaccessible, one way to think is that this is my personal problem that this is not accessible. But one can also say that it is a political problem that the world is designed in certain ways, to make spaces inaccessible for me. And once you start thinking about that then you think about tackling it politically. So, these kind[s] of lessons, I learned from the feminist movement.

- Anbu, 31, disability rights activist.

Feminist principles also played a key role in their perception of leadership. When asked about the principles that anchor their work, participants mentioned several tenets of feminist leadership. For a better understanding, please refer to the table below; this table was made as part of the literature review process preceding the needs assessment. During this process, we systematically reviewed available literature on feminist leadership and rearranged the tenets of feminist leadership under the following themes.

Transformative	Collective	Social Justice	Intersectional	Sustainable	Role of feminist principles	Who is a leader?
Challenging hierarchies & power structures	Use of power in solidarity	Micro and macro social justice concerns	Diverse voices of women across identities	Structures remain even if leaders go away	In harmony with feminist principles	Possessed not by a few but many people in varying capacities
Personal and collective transform	Collective power	Identify injustice and oppressions	Focus on marginalised voices	Intercorpo-reality	Breaking masculin-ised norms	Developing leaders who encourage leadership
Positive change	Creative collabora-tions	Pursuit of social, legal, political, economic and cultural equality	Development of inclusive & holistic communities	Has a life of its own	Internali-sation of feminism	Recognition of women's leadership
Expose patriarchal links to leadership	Bridge per-sonal & collective freedom	Redistri-bution of power & responsi-bility		Not a fixed state, but a process	Circular, bottom-up, and less male	Altruism and sacrifice
Participatory		Continued challenging of dominant social norms				Promote emotionality

Table 1

iii.   Intersectionality

> I wish that we start from ground zero. We need to talk about Dalit women who go out every day, who work, who are getting raped every other day, we need to talk about them. It is very important to talk about these women. Until and unless all these women are not free, no one can be free.
>
> *- Humaira, 25, labour rights activist.*

The most prominent lesson participants gained from feminism is the concept of intersectionality. Throughout the interviews, it was seen that participants referred to intersectionality as the crux of feminist politics. The responses echoed a strong belief that feminism by definition should be intersectional.

It was repeated across interviews that having an intersectional understanding and praxis is important for any movement. The participants argued against being reduced to either one of their identities and sought to be seen as people holding multiple identities and life experiences and extend the same for communities they engage with.

This takes to the murky waters of doing politics. While intersectionality has become commonplace within academic and social impact spaces, the efforts made to actually use it as a tool to work towards justice appears to be lacking. Being intersectional, according to our participants, is often reduced to tokenistic inclusion of a variety of people belonging to different communities.

> In some spaces, I get frustrated. People want trans-persons to come on their panels, some want Bahujan trans-people to come on their panels, some want Bahujan persons on panels - then and only then will they call you. I am frustrated because you are not calling me because of my work. You are calling me because of my identity. I know that my identities are important and that there should be representation. But it should not be in a tokenistic way. You can involve people in a holistic way rather than offering those spaces because of identity alone. I think this has also happened to me that sometimes I am offered a leadership position just because of my identity. Sometimes, which is a lot of times, I haven't been able to get some leadership role or my opinions haven't been considered valuable or people haven't considered me a leader because of my identity. So, it has worked in both ways.
>
> *- Shyam, 26, transman, social justice activist.*

Participants' narratives also reveal the lack of intersectional praxis within social justice and feminist movements. Mythili, an anti-caste feminist activist, points out that as a Dalit woman, she is considered as a foot soldier of the movement, rather than someone capable of making decisions and being a leader.

> We are just foot soldiers of movements, and we are foot soldiers of NGOs, but we are not actually where we are supposed to be. And where we are supposed to be is at the decision-making table. There is a very famous African saying and I say this everywhere I go - If you are not at the table, you are on the menu. And I think we are sick and tired of being on the menu for generations, for centuries. So, what we are asking is a seat at the table. And to be at the table, we need facilitating spaces to get us there. We are not going to automatically just land there.

- Mythili, 34, feminist activist.

Further, it was also seen that the responsibility of educating the mainstream about the margins is also often passed on to individuals from marginalised communities. Isai's experience speaks of such an instance -

> I feel there is a strong need to develop, nurture voices of Muslim women right now and it is not a crime. I am not communal. I want the voices of Muslims to be heard in secular spaces. I have no precedent of doing any of this, it is so difficult to find, it is so difficult to chalk out my path. While I desperately look for mentorship, I don't find any specific mentorship, but I definitely discuss with our feminist leaders. [I spoke with feminist organisations about engaging with problems faced by Muslime women]. After a whole day of engagement, I felt it was a very fruitful discussion. But it was too laborious, wherein I had to put across my point as a Muslim woman to all of these other women who were quite opposed to religion.

- Isai, 29, citizenship rights activist.

Here, we observe that the laborious task of educating a dominant faction of leaders occupying feminist spaces, is placed on a lone feminist activist from a marginalised community. We cannot underplay the importance of such dialogues and spaces to resolve tensions, and acknowledge differences existing within the feminist movement space, even though they are sparse.

Moving away from tokenistic inclusion does require serious and deliberate efforts, however, the burden cannot be placed on already marginalised individuals, but needs to be taken up as a collective effort. This also highlights the need for organic leadership from within the community and representation of individuals from marginalised communities in positions of power, a point raised by participants, as a key aspect of being feminist. Several participants believed that enabling and nurturing such leadership must be a key goal of their movements.

> If you look at leaders, the one who [are] at the top, even when the work is within marginalised communities - the leaders come from outside. You have Medha Patkar or Kamla Bhasin coming in and being leaders in marginalised spaces. I want to see more and more leaders from marginalised communities leading their own communities. I want more and more women to feel like they belong in this space and make it their own. They should feel that "din bhi apne, raat bhi apne" [the days belong to us, and so do the nights]. They should be able to claim their right to roads or public spaces, and their rights as citizens. This is what I want to see. I can slowly see some impact. It is a very slow process. But eventually I want women of the community to lead the community.
>
> *- Vaiga, 35, feminist activist.*

The question of representation and leadership cannot be addressed without talking about allyship. Intersectionality and feminist leadership principles places great importance on shared-leadership and solidarity. Mythili succinctly articulates the meaning of allyship below.

A question that I am asked a lot is how do we be allies of Dalit women and other marginalised women? Being allies [does] not [mean] being our mouthpiece. Being allies is to facilitate spaces in every place that you are in. That would facilitate an entry point for marginalised women and queer and trans community. Because, if you are dalit and you are queer, if you are dalit and trans, it is a whole other ball game. So, facilitating entry into spaces and a seat at the table, and resources - that is what it requires.

Efforts made towards practising allyship in this sense was seen in another leader's response.

I honestly say that I am someone who is trying to … I am a man trying to do feminism. I believe that I should never hold the mantle of [being a] feminist. I should give that space to people in the community. As an ally, the ally should never walk ahead. Similarly, I tell this to the non-disabled people who are coming to the movement, that I have nothing against you, and I believe that it is great when non-disabled folks come to the movement. But disabled people should hold the power.

These viewpoints are an indication of a gradual shift towards espousing feminist leadership principles in praxis in the current ecosystem of youth movements in the country.

Suggestions for fostering leadership

As youth leaders at different points of their journeys, the participants had clear opinions on what is needed to build and nurture feminist leadership. The suggestions offered a range of practical solutions coming from a place of thoughtful reflection on their experience are presented below in two parts –

A   Suggestions towards a structural change

B   Suggestions for individual development

i.   Suggestions towards a structural change to foster leadership

i.   Financial support, resource-sharing, and legal aid

Social change work requires intense labour and commitment. Participants argued against the romanticisation of movement work as something that is selfless and altruistic. The labour that they put in is rendered invisible through this romanticisation and hampers meaningful work from being done. Georgie, a 27-year-old political party activist, makes this loud and clear through his example of the challenge posed by lack of financial resources within electoral politics.

> This work involves a lot of money, resources, etc. It should be a paid thing. So that is one of the reasons why people are not interested to get into this space. Many times, when I go out for rallies or whenever I organise some event, one of the main question is – 'Why are you spending money for all this? Is this giving you anything back?' We are interested to do this. The society thinks in a very utilitarian way. To get things done, you have to get something out of it. Don't see this as a career I would say. We are giving this connotation of selfless volunteer political work. That is why people [perceive becoming a politician] as a career because they have to make money. They also have to leave. That is why people engage in all this corruption. So, I would say that we should take the selfless part out of it. See them as mere human beings ... Don't see it as volunteer thing. As any other work you do, recognise this work as also work, that's it.

Lack of economic resources was cited as a major cause for even most genuine young people from coming into the movement spaces. This often leads to the exclusion of marginalised youth in movements.

> The ones who identify issues and want to work on solutions don't have resources to do this. "pet ghar pe rakhke toh aa nahi sakte hain na" [If they cannot think of earning a livelihood, they cannot participate]. They too need money to survive. They need money to get technical equipment, to do anything. They need money for travel, for organising programmes. How can one pay out of their own pockets? Especially the ones I am talking about are people who do not come from families that have generations of wealth. They are not fluent English speakers. They are working class people who recognise issues and want to be involved in this work.
>
> *- Pallavi, 36, feminist activist.*

Nadhi argues that the NGOisation of political work has made political repression through Foreign Contribution Regulation Act (FCRA) revisions easier. In the recent past, the state has weaponised FCRA to target organisations that have spoken up against the human rights crisis in the country. She underlines the need for alternate forms of resourcing and funding.

> Now that we are seeing all of this … the kind of pressure that is coming up on NGOs. We are seeing that in FCRA being rejected, we have to figure out alternatives by organising and mobilising ourselves. I know that a lot of elder feminists have criticised young ways of feminists for NGOisation but obviously it is not necessarily valid. It wasn't valid at that time. But now I think, we are finally seeing why they felt … what were the dangers in getting too involved in a project. We have to figure out ways of moving out of that mindset and figuring out alternative resources. I don't know what that shape would be like … I think it means, focussing more on movements and campaigns rather than projects.
>
> *- Nadhi, 32, feminist activist.*

Working in a formal NGO set up is one way people managed to pursue their social change work. Even while acknowledging the limitations of NGO-work, Vaiga says that as a Muslim woman from a working-class family in North India, engaging in feminist NGO work is her political assertion. A sense of lack of support – financial and legal underlies this choice.

As we have already seen, young people coming into movement spaces face tremendous backlash and are faced with several challenges. The support systems in place operate through informal spaces and relationships, except for a few institutional measures which exist. All participants stressed on the importance of financial support to be able to do the work that they do. Isai recounted how people were reluctant to offer her the support she needed to pursue legal aid.

Another way in which youth leaders coped with lack of any formal financial support is by relying on their support system – friends and communities. Such measures include lending institutional support to collectives, sharing a range of resources (physical infrastructure, access to communication and information technology), support in grant making process, etc.

Existing ways of sharing resources between organisations works on a shared sense of solidarity between individuals. Participants stress on a real need to institutionalise organisational support-lending. The ways in which resources are shared, shifts according to the nature of the work. Owing to her work as a labour union leader, working at the grassroot, Humaira spoke to the experience of union and political activists. Immense support from the communities she works with has been her pillar of strength.

> Like if I am working today, whatever clothes I want to wear, whatever I am spending, then people themselves pay for it. No matter how poor they are, if I go and work somewhere, then I can get two meals. If I need anything then people give it to me. So it is most important that we go inside the masses and prepare them and the public will support you in every way. I think the solution is

> this, what is important is how the work should start. For us, that's how we get started. What is important is how the work should start.

Another support mechanism that young leaders are in dire need of in the current context is legal. As state repression increases manifold every passing day, there is a constant targeting of activists and civil society leaders doing critical political work. In such a context, having knowledge about legal aspects and having a repository of legal aid providers who can support these young people when in need is very important.

Lack of legal support and the state violence unleashed through the law-and-order machinery is a strong deterrent for marginalised youth. Shyam, an Ambedkarite transman recalls his dilemma during the anti-CAA NRC protests.

> When the CAA NRC protests were going on, for the first few months, I was going every day. But one day, police were beating every one, and I was also there. After that I started thinking if I should go or not. I was so scared. If I go there and if I am beaten up again, how will I escape? If some people say that they are scared, there is also this negative connotation attached to it in our space. They say ki "arey they will beat up anyway, but we believe in the cause, so we should go and keep going". But for a young person who is surviving on their own, or who comes from marginalised identities, it is difficult. People who have those kinds of support, they might be able to go. You know, in activist spaces everyone has lawyers. But it is so difficult for people coming from different identities to actually face this violence.

While pro-bono legal aid is being provided by several lawyers, according to our participants, access is restricted to certain pockets, and often leaves out the most vulnerable.

ii. Sustainability of organisation

Resources play a crucial role in movements as we have seen. And absence or presence of resources have direct implications on building sustainable organisations. Other than financial resources, the know-how of building and growing sustainable work is also critical resource for young people. It was suggested that mentorship also involves passing of practical knowledge on how to do this work. Deniz also suggests that such learning should be facilitated through mentors from within the community.

> When I was working with [organisation X] in Nepal, immediately after the earthquake, they distributed sanitary pads in the villages that were badly affected. It is good that they are providing sanitary napkins to women. I was not working with X, but I was there as part of some team. When we visited the villages, children were using those sanitary pads as masks or eye masks or something. Because they did not teach women to use the sanitary pads. And women knew cotton cloth. They know how to use cotton cloth, how to reuse cotton cloth. So instead of imposing sanitary pads without teaching, they could have just given good quality cotton cloth, multiple cloth to them - which women know how to use. And they have the wisdom to use that. This is just a random example of how organisations come as experts and forget that communities have their own wisdom. [It's important to understand] that communities have their own wisdom and a way of doing that can be inviting mentors from the communities that you want to work with.

Participants agree that it is crucial to learn from the community about their problems and demands to build meaningful movements. This approach rooted on the ground can enable sustainable changes.

Given the centrality of informal support systems, exposure and access to various networks is crucial for every young person. Networks are the roadway into most resources, knowledge, mentorship, and similar opportunities. However, access to networks is hampered by exclusionary practices within such circles. Srutija, a climate justice activist, addresses this issue of access and argues that even the few opportunities that exist are accessed through personal connections in the social sector.

> If we talk about accessibility, and I really really do think that there are people who might miss out knowing these opportunities. Primarily because it always gets circulated in particular sectors and among particular networks. At times it's very tricky especially when it comes to job opportunities, or fellowships. I think that's something that I do now, very [mindfully]. When something comes, [I] circulate it among different layers and different sectors of people ... at times there is a challenge of reaching right persons at the right time. So, I think accessibility ... I think I am privileged to learn the language as such, because of which I have been able to get many opportunities. Language has always been a big issue for many people, so I think that's the hurdle that I have seen about that. Also, I don't know whether I would have been able to access these kinds of opportunities without the support of my friends who have been working in this field for some time. So, I don't know, I think there is some gap which comes when it comes ... about knowing these kinds of opportunities exist.

The inequity in access to information and inaccessible language make it difficult for young people to make use of resources. This speaks to the importance of building networks that can share resources and enable access.

iv. Safe non-judgemental spaces

Safety within movement spaces was identified as a key need for fostering leadership. While movement spaces do preach to uphold values of justice, in practise often the same exclusionary practises rooted in oppressive structures are replicated within these spaces. Hence it is necessary to acknowledge that participants feeling a lack of safety within such spaces and to build mechanisms to ensure well-being of everyone involved.

This is especially crucial in the youth activism space as the participants of such a space can be as young as 15 years old, and require special protection even according to the laws. However, Varsha reports that there are no such formal mechanisms that exist to her knowledge that addresses the safety of younger adults.

> There needs to be ... not just training sessions on how to manage children, youth and younger youths. And even youth in the activist spaces need to know how to deal with different age groups because ... every person is different, at the same time everybody is at a very different stage of life. A 17-year-old and 28-years old both are youths but [the former] is in a different phase of their life and [the latter] in a different phase of their life. That is something the person who [supervises] them needs to understand and the organisation and the people who are handling youths need to understand that they cannot treat both age groups similarly. For example, there is a 28-year-old guy trying to hit on a 17-year-old. Even if the 17-year-old is uncomfortable about it, they might not be able to say it to the person who is in-charge. But if the person managing the complaints is actually going around room talking to people, trying to understand what is happening, then the 17-year-old might actually be able to help out. This step will also safeguard youths under the age of 18 because I have often seen that many organisations do not take in people under the age of 17 due to safety issues. There are no proper child protection units even within existing organisations.
>
> *- Varsha, 20, climate justice activist*

Movement spaces are also spaces of respite for many. It is where they look for not just political support, but also hope and comfort. Participants reflected on the hostility that people have to meet within such spaces, owing to differences in identities or political positions. Intentionally building a space where people can make mistakes and learn for them was also identified as an urgent need. It was felt by participants that such spaces would enable young people to be able to reflect and strategise, rather than constantly firefighting.

v. Mentors

Mentorship was another important need identified by the participants. Participants felt that mentorship is an important relationship that shapes political journeys of youth activists.

Mentors provide emotional support, and also facilitate participants' access to different resources. Their presence was described as being similar to a shield that supports them during all weathers. However, this is not a stagnant relationship. Participants reported having been mentored by different people at different points of their journeys. As they grew in positions or when their politics evolved, participants sought out new mentors. While for some people – coming from intergenerational privilege – mentorship was easily accessible, most of the participants from margins expressed concern over lack of proper mentorship.

iv. Increased accessibility

When we speak about resources, it is most crucial to identify the barriers that impact access. While structural shifts are required to change the system, in the short-term, avenues to pick up skills were important to hone young people's leadership. The demand for skilling support came from the participants' experience of being excluded due to lack of access to social and cultural capital.

Anbu uses the example of dominance of the English language in movement spaces to highlight the challenge of inaccessibility succinctly:

> … many people may not have the ability to … sometimes people say that write to me for more. Many people may not have the confidence to write an email … Or phone or call. It would be better if you could say that call me or send a voice note on WhatsApp. Maybe they are comfortable with all that. It is important to be informal to give access to young people. People are not comfortable with formal spaces. One needs to tell people that it is okay, if you don't write very fancy English, it is fine. But also telling people the struggle one went through might help people to identify with you more.

This clearly highlights the impact of knowledge of English skills on one's access to knowledge, opportunities, every day practices, and one's self-perception. Hence, while we work towards removing structural barriers and institutionalising support mechanisms, it is extremely important to also listen to the needs put forth by young people, and ensure they are fulfilled. The following section details different skills the participants thought were most important.

ii. Individual-centric changes to foster leadership

In terms of skill-needs, participants raised several asks that they think are crucial for a young leader. The need to generate knowledge resources and ensuring equitable access to them formed the basis of the suggestions put forth, especially concerning personality development.

Participants underlined the need for producing evidence-based data and knowledge products pertinent to various causes and movements. Such knowledge must centre the voices of the most marginalised and be grounded on lived realities. Along with this, it was also felt that whoever wishes to engage with movements must have ground exposure to be able to understand the community and their wisdom

to identify contextual needs of the community. In addition, know-how of building sustainable movements and doing social change work including, but not limited to practical ways of operating under current political context, mobilisation, fundraising, etc. was also considered important.

Younger participants raised the need for special trainings (regarding child protection) for people to work with adolescents, especially those below the age of 18 years. Considering the breadth of the category of youth in terms of age, it is necessary that concerns of safety of younger leaders be addressed without hampering their agency.

Shortcomings in language skills poses a great barrier for young leaders to grow within the movement space. This also indicates the dominance of an elite-urban-English educated group within the movement space. While efforts must be taken to break down these barriers structurally, language support is of great relevance to young leaders – especially the majority who haven't had access to English education from childhood. Effective communication skills and soft skills are also considered crucial to be able to do social change work. However, all these are determined by one's social location. There are ways of speaking, being and doing that are considered superior, which often end up being exclusionary criteria for being part of networks and spaces.

All participants also agreed on the need for a curriculum or a resource pool for young people (ones who are not yet part of any movement work). Such resources developed for young people must be accessible, interactive, and interdisciplinary to provide a holistic learning experience.

CONCLUSION

Through interviews with 24 youth leaders from across the country engaged in various movements, the study sought to explore the activist journeys of youth, and their relationships with feminism and leadership, as part of a larger endeavour to understand, operationalise, and build resources for feminist youth leadership in India.

To situate youth studies within the Indian context, we explored the meanings of youthhood and what it means to be a youth in the country. Being young is rather associated with certain qualities of vigour, openness to change and learning, than age, as it is one's social location that shapes the lived reality of youth. Despite falling within the age category of youth or being young leaders, age had little role in shaping their journeys. Youth movements and mobilisations emerge in resistance to systems of oppression that cut beyond age-based categories. Several participants spoke of the exclusion they have faced owing to their identity(ies) of caste, religion, gender, or sexuality. Their perception of activism is firmly rooted in the demand to change the status quo, and restore their human rights.

Lived experiences, and exposure to knowledge and networks determined young people's foray into activism. They enter movement spaces during their time in universities, or through engagement with NGOs. Intergenerational wealth and social-cultural capital also facilitate entry into social change work, often initially through altruistic or volunteer activities, or reading. If we trace the political journeys of young people, we can see constant changes in terms of strategies, practices, and core beliefs. This is indicative of the dynamicity of youth activism and willingness to stay open to constant changes. Participants' willingness to change reflected in their perception of what counts as effective activism. This also meant less rigidity in terms of practice and a space to learn through mistakes and experiences.

The widespread romanticisation of activism as something akin to altruism places great burden on young leaders, often making them the bearers of expectations from their communities. Despite the gendered differences in claiming a leadership title, participants largely identified leadership as a site of constant negotiation. Being a leader meant that one is in constant tussle with the state, authorities, organisations, communities, and the self. The participants feel that leadership came with the expectation of perfection. They struggle with the pressure of living up to the expectations in terms, for instance, always taking the right decisions, shaping the discourse, and constantly engaging with mass media. The pressure to be perfect is also internalised, pushing participants towards further self-improvement. However, being a leader hence also meant navigating savarna-masculine tropes of power and leadership and carving out space for oneself and their community. On the other hand, we also saw that for participants who were born into social capital, acknowledgement of privileges and critical reflection on one's own positionality was a crucial aspect of leadership.

For a movement to be sustainable, participants agree that one must reject the supremacy of individuals and focus on building a space for everyone to grow. This is crucial for the work to sustain even if individuals leave the movement. While some young people spoke of relating to and closely engaging with communities with whom they share identities, it is also seen that shared political values glue people together to form interdependent communities. There are significant roadblocks that one needs to face when it comes to building and engaging with communities, since they are not a monolith.

Participants often found it challenging to navigate their relationships with communities while holding positions of power. There is also a distinction between the community one works with and the community one seeks. Engagement in activism often breaks relationships with blood families or filial communities. Communities based on shared politics or values or experiences, are sought out and built by young people, through constantly evolving processes.

Youth also tend to identify themselves through the political ideologies they commit to. However, the practice of values and principles can happen even if one does not self-identify with any ideology. Given the unequal access to resources and

knowledge, the language of political jargons is inaccessible to a majority in the country. However, political consciousness emerges through experiences of varied kind and not just through formal education. This is especially true in the case of feminism.

Even when youth did not identify themselves as feminists, the core values, and principles they operated from were feminist and they were introduced to feminist tenets through the works of leaders who are not considered "feminist leaders", such as Ambedkar, Phule, or Periyar. This reinforces the centrality of intersectionality in feminist thoughts.

In this context, practising feminist values in one's everyday lives is an act of resistance which demands immense labour and self-reflexivity. Feminism also helped young people critically understand their personal experiences and identify injustices meted out to them and people around, owing to their identities. Feminist ideology offers the lens to bring out the political in the personal, and critically understand how power operates in different spaces and relationships. Feminist principles also played a key role in their perception of leadership. The responses echoed a strong belief that feminism by definition should be intersectional. Their ideas of allyship, representation and solidarity were informed by intersectionality, and critique hollow tokenism.

The respondents' perception of their individual contribution to the movement depended on gendered ideas of self – we see that non-cis male leaders often shy away from asserting their role. Participants often felt their role in the movement is that of a bridge between the personal and political. They claim that they constantly learn from their own experiences and use those stories to connect with the people they work with. This builds a shared sense of solidarity, and inspires people to interrogate their own experiences critically, and demand for what they are entitled to.

In the face of adversity and inaccessibility, young people depend on their families, friends, organisations, and mentors. Talking, laughing, having fun, and spending time together energised them to no end. Friend circles were also spaces to discuss ideas, informally strategise, and learn. Women activists who often find themselves in the media's limelight, credited their family as being their biggest support system. They stressed on the importance of domestic and care work support as being critical for activists. Operating in a context where resources are far and few, young leaders relied on the solidarity between movement spaces to access critical support. Such collaborations help activists to cross the barriers posited by lack of funding or formal registration. Support systems that can enable activism are critical. Participants remind us of the need to invest resources and energy on building support systems, where support must be structural and institutionalised rather than one-off or individualised. Only then can it lead to sustainable results.

There are no easy answers to any of the questions raised through the study owing to how complicated and nuanced narratives of activism and feminism. The narratives throw light on the different ways young people navigate power, feminism, and leadership. Despite the differences, it is possible to identify that young people are engaging with intersectionality and finding ways to use it as a tool in their political practice. The yearning for community spaces also stood out throughout the conversations – community spaces that has space for erring, being emotional, and learning.

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Appendix A

1. Names of respondents and areas of work

When explaining the project and obtaining informed consent from the participants, we asked them if they consented to their real names being added to the appendix of the paper.

Twenty participants consented to their names being added to the appendix. These are as follows:

S.No	Name	Core area of work	S.No	Name	Core area of work
1	Tony	Disability rights	11	Anil	Anti caste
2	Nodeep	Labour rights	12	Priyanka	Anti caste
3	David	Youth rights	13	Manikanta	Anti caste
4	Gauri	Youth rights	14	Benisha	Cimate justice
5	Nethra	Youth rights	15	Rishika	Women's rights
6	Safoora	Citizenship rights	16	Joel	Political activism
7	Maitree	Citizenship rights	17	Supongtla	Women's rights
8	Prabhakaran	Climate justice	18	Babitha	Cimate justice
9	Gargie	Women's rights	19	Sunita	Youth rights
10	Christy	Youth rights	20	Progyanika	Youth rights

The remaining four participants did not consent to their real names being added here, so we continue to use their psuedonyms.

S.No	Psuedonym	Core area of work
1	Ayaz	Disability rights
2	Shyam	Youth rights
3	Vaiga	Women's rights
4	Varsha	Climate justice

2. Question Guide

a.) Journey into and within the movement/social change work

- Area of work, position within movement/organization.
- What sparked interest in the issue/movement?
- Why did they decide to get involved? When? In what capacity?
- Who all played key roles throughout the journey into and within the movement?
- Did their engagement with the movement, political positions, and idea of work change over time? How?
- What were their roles or levels of engagement through time?
- When and how did they come to lead the work? Did they aspire to lead?
- What were the challenges faced during the journey, and how did they face them?

b.) Tasks and role

- What are the specific goals/changes that they are working towards or which areas are they looking to impact?
- How do they see as their contribution to the movement?
- What does it mean to them? How has it impacted them as a person and those around them? Any changes in themselves, their interpersonal relationships, families, communities, etc.
- How does their work/contribution affect the lives of people within the movement?

c.) Being a leader

- What does it mean to be a leader? What is expected of them/ what did they expect it to be?
- What are the challenges they face?

d.) Views on leadership

- Who would they like to be led by? (role model) Did this idea change over time?
- Did the mode of leadership learned from role models work for them in the past?

e.) Context of operation

- How have their identities and external socio-political and organizational context shaped their involvement in movement/leadership? How are these factors addressed?

f.) Resources

- What are the support mechanisms or resources they rely on? How are these accessed, and are they effective/suitable?
- Previous engagement with capacity building/agency building interventions?
- What resources are required – in any form – for a young leader? Challenges in accessing resources.

Probes:

- Mentoring.
- Support needed from peer networks, intergenerational support; support from organisations.
- Resources required now and while moving forward.
- Resources that would have been useful in the past.

g.) Engagement with feminism

- Are you familiar with feminist principles?
- Do you think feminist principles have played a role in your work

- Which, how, to what end, where did they hear/learn
- How did you adapt it for your work
- Will you continue to use them, in what capacity

h.) Concluding remarks

- Do they call themselves a youth leader?
- Do they call themselves feminist youth leader?

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