

Feminist Youth Leadership Building

A practitioner's
work (in progress) book on
principles and processes





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.

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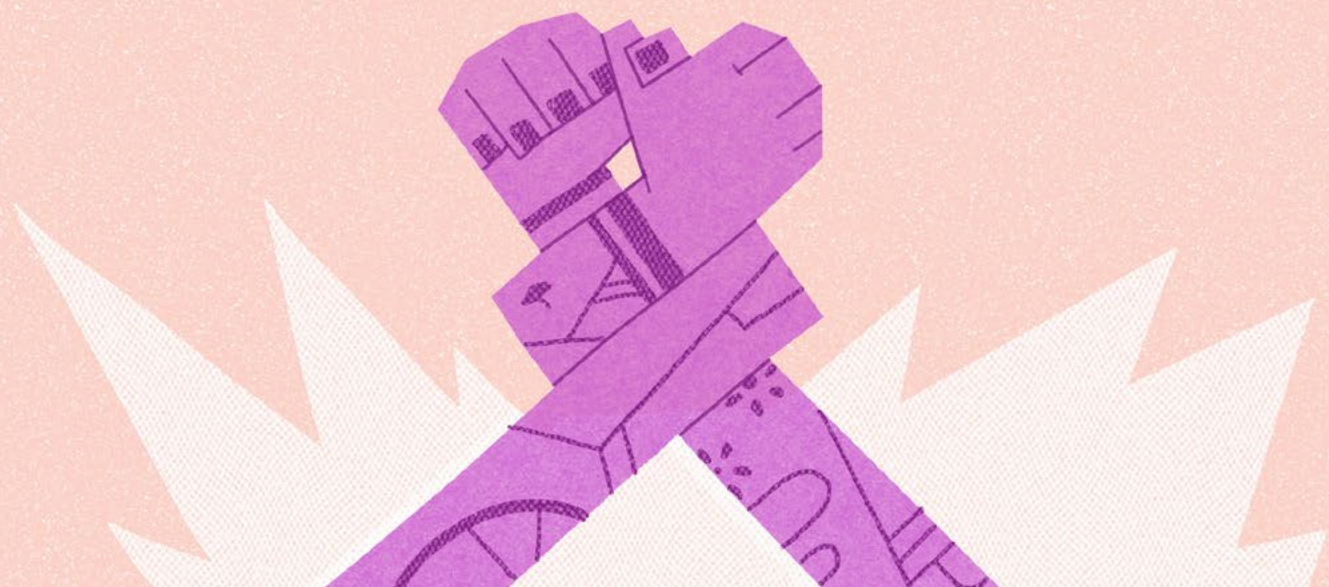
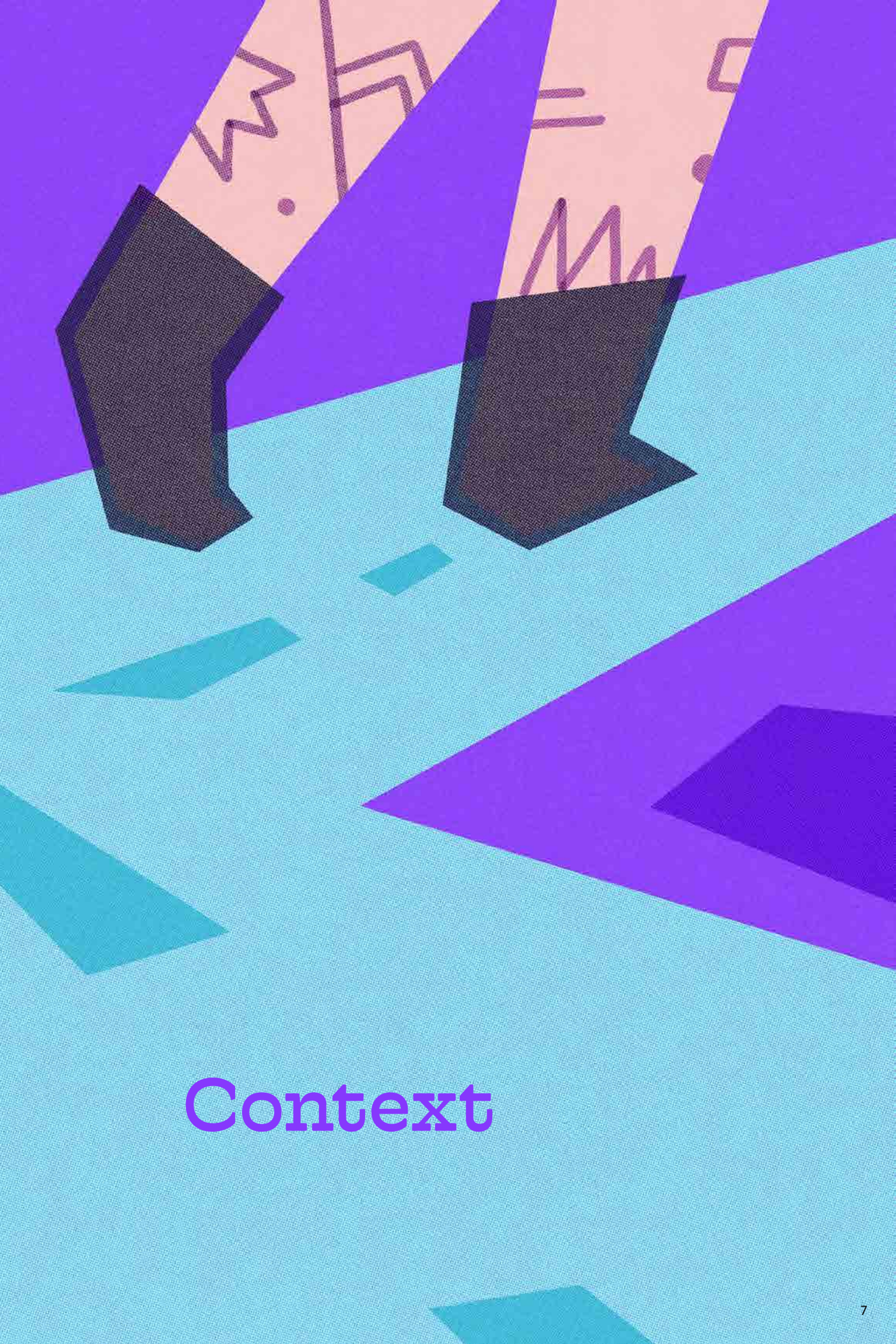


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Context

Context

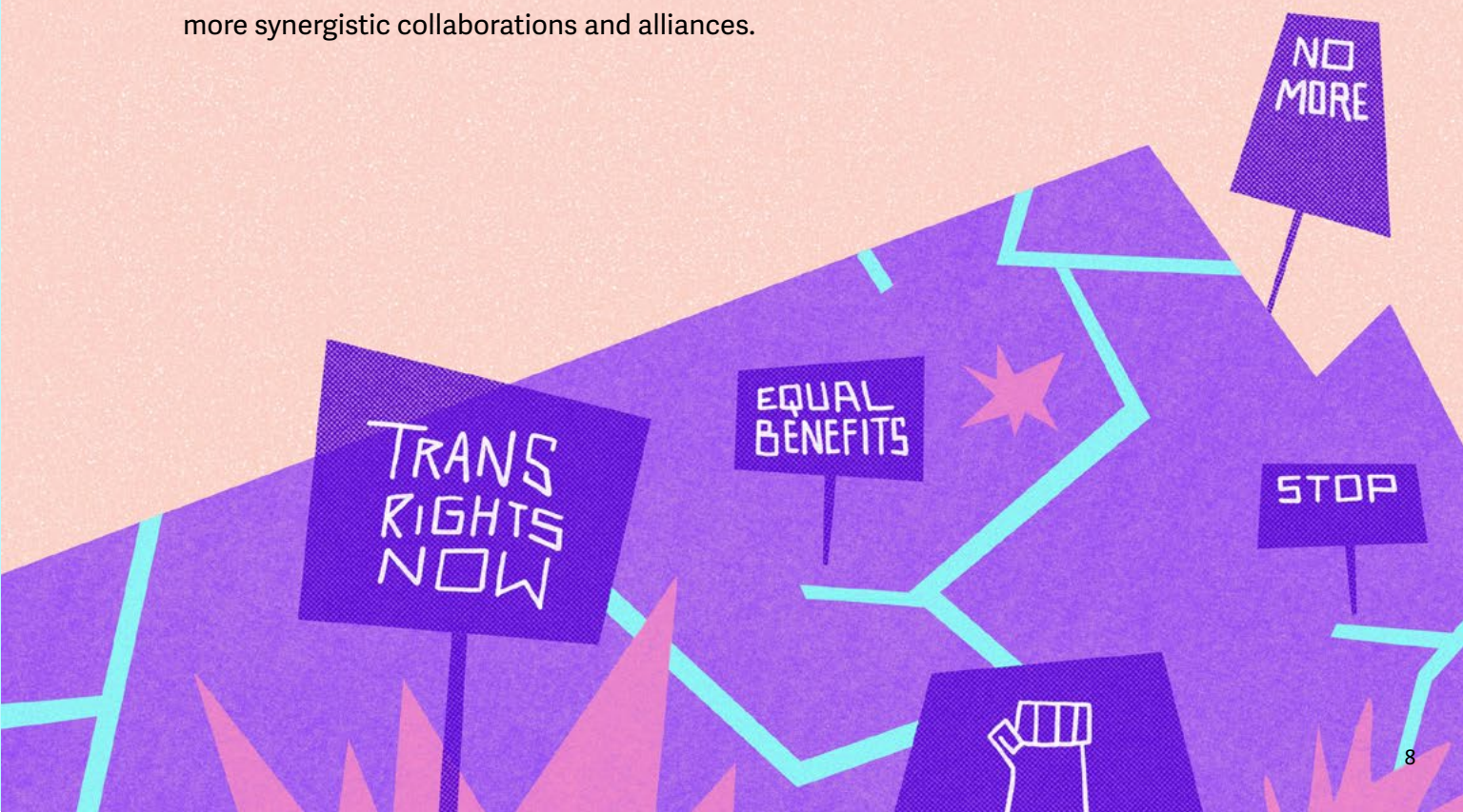
A1

The Feminist Youth Leadership Building Programme

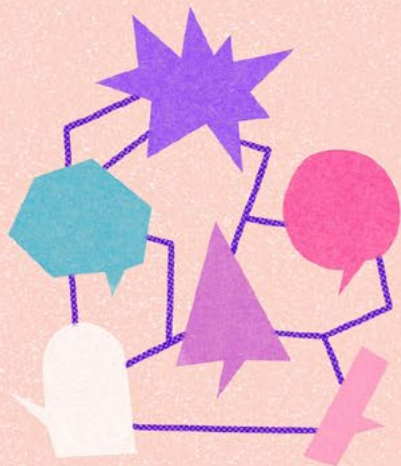
The Generation Equality Forum (GEF), convened by UN Women in 2021, kickstarted a five-year process of intergenerational, multi-stakeholder convergence around the goal of achieving irreversible gender equality. Through this process intervention, Gender at Work India took on the task of advancing GEF's mandate by creating a contextual programme around building a feminist youth leadership in India. The objective was to bring together people, knowledge, and pedagogy in a way that would lead to secondary and tertiary impacts and promote just, equitable, and intersectional feminist agendas across civil society.

This project was specifically located in the overarching context of a nation mired in deep ideological chasms, a shrinking space for civil society, and several draconian laws and policies clamping down on movement-building and rights-based work. With a constantly shifting landscape of political realities, youth activism also morphed and adapted to be more effective, while simultaneously 'calling in' their own movements for lack of diversity and meaningful representation.

Hence, there is a growing need to build and claim spaces that can bring together the different strands of the feminist movement in India – across generations, identities, issues, and regions – to build more synergistic collaborations and alliances.



As a response to this need, the goal of our process intervention was three-fold.



The first goal was 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 was done through a rigorous and iterative needs assessment, including a literature review of secondary sources, a mapping of curricula developed for youth and feminist leadership in India, and detailed interviews with youth leaders to understand where the gaps were vis-a-vis access, resources, and perspectives in the praxis of feminist leadership.



The second goal was to borrow the gap analysis from the needs assessment to build knowledge and pedagogy for feminist youth leadership in civil society in India. Knowledge-building was done through a process of co-creation with young leaders and other stakeholders who engaged with the project through its 11 months. The shaping of new pedagogy brought in artists and other non-development practitioners to help break out of 'normative' moulds of design, delivery, and dissemination of learning spaces for feminist youth leadership building processes.



The third goal was to pilot the curriculum and pedagogy, and to document some of these process learnings through a white paper. Two Feminist Labs brought together 27 youth leaders to interact with and help further nuance the knowledge developed, and act as pilots from whom specific learnings were gleaned and documented. This cohort of leaders will also go on to plug into local, national, and inter-governmental spaces of policy advocacy to further the Generation Equality Forum's aims and the Sustainable Development Goals.

We took 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. The research (needs assessment and white paper) constantly informed and was informed by the praxis (knowledge building and piloting) in an attempt to build a process that was simultaneously iterative and intentional.

CURRENT FORMS
& CHALLENGES
OF FEMINIST
MOVEMENT IN INDIA?

VIRTUAL CONSULTATION

LITERATURE

REVIEW

Context

A2

Illustrated Map of the Journey

NEEDS

ASSESSMENT

10 ARTISTS
-
EXPANSION
AND
OUT-OF-
THE-BOX
THINKING

SECOND
FEMINIST LAB

THE FIRST FEMINIST LAB

Before we officially started this process, we began with some organisational preparedness to undertake the process work. Even though Gender at Work India is a process intensive organisation, we recognise that preparation is a must which often begins with a series of internal conversations on tenacity, emotional labour, and shadow work. This is followed by workshopping around trusting the process and submitting and committing to the process of the holding space.

- **What are the current forms and challenges of the feminist youth movement(s) in India? What will it take to build and support feminist youth leadership towards more resilient and inclusive movements?**
- **We teased out the central questions further, expanding on how the practitioners saw youthhood and feminist leadership in their praxis.**
- **A literature review of secondary sources coupled with a review of 32 curricula and manuals on feminist youth leadership in India and globally, laid the groundwork for understanding what already exists as knowledge and resources within Indian development sector.**
- **Needs assessment through exploratory conversations to ask youth leaders across India.**
- **We realised and acknowledged the need for expansion and thinking out-of-the-box beyond the development sector to develop alternative pedagogies for designing the Feminist Labs.**
- **The first Feminist Lab to explored connections and build cross-sectoral, geographical, thematic, and identity based linkages with the intention of breaking away from a siloed approach to activism. Held in Bangalore in August 2022.**
- **The second Feminist Lab in November 2022 was a way of consolidating the learnings, acknowledging the specific hurdles that got in the way of building collectives, and planning for a sustainable network of feminist youth leaders.**

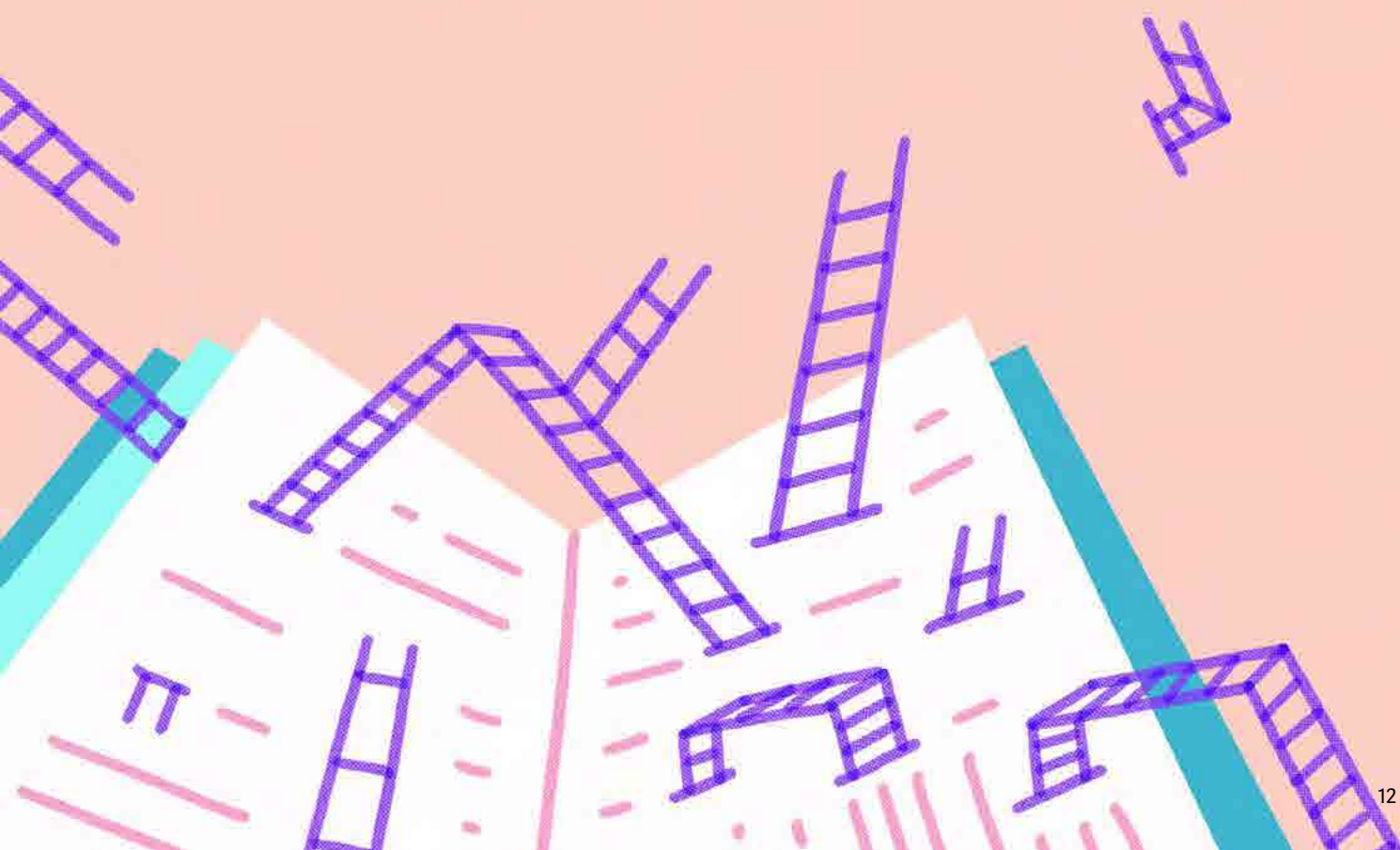
Context

A3

A Workbook and A Work-in-Progress Book

Through the course of this process intervention between January and November 2022 we engaged in several discussions in small and large groups, online, and in person trying to get to the heart of the question: **What does it take for youth leadership to reimagine the feminist movement as it stands, and what does it take for civil society to make room for more feminist youth leadership?** We spoke to over 100 people with every individual contributing to a painstaking examination and re-examination of youthhood, feminism, movement-building, and leadership.

This led us to a set of questions and principles that hold together the spirit of the iterative explorations mentioned above. Running parallel was the work of putting some of these ideas into praxis - of engaging with the questions, shaping and re-shaping them, holding them up to the complex realities that they are embedded in, and doing the difficult work of finding actionable versions of idealised feminist principles. This **document curates all three - the questions that framed our work, the ways in which we actioned them, and the learnings that were gathered along the way.** In doing this, we invite you to think with us and also to get a real-time peek at the work we are doing to engage with these questions ourselves in a process that is still unfolding and evolving. This is, therefore, simultaneously a workbook and a work-in-progress book.



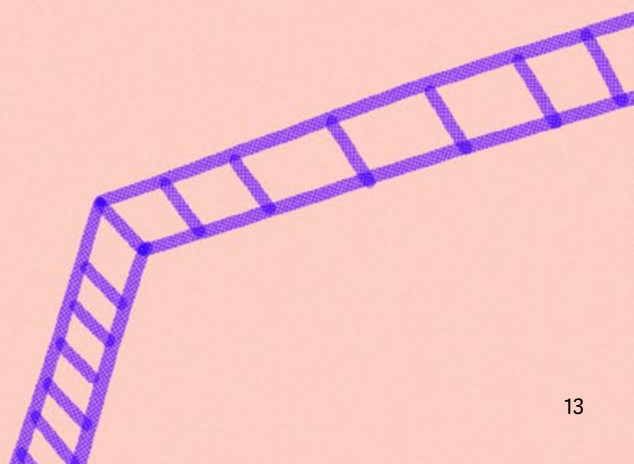
Why was this workbook written? Who is it for?

This workbook is designed for **practitioners, funders, and activists who are interested in building programmes, interventions, and processes to support feminist or youth leadership in India.** Through this workbook, we invite readers to think collectively about contemporary feminist youth leadership and its challenges. We realise that **it is a steep task to make room for every nuance embedded in feminist youth movement-building** with ever growing differences, a shrinking space for dialogue, and dynamic multiculturalism in India. **This workbook is a humble attempt to share the year-long process we undertook** to unpack some of these concepts, ideas, and methods. It is also a reminder that most work on feminist youth leadership – by virtue of how many hegemonic narratives it seeks to challenge – is difficult, slow, and iterative.

Among the few resources that exist on feminist youth leadership building, most curricula and manuals are prescriptive and almost linear in how we can 'arrive at' feminist leadership, youth leadership, and the feminist institutions that support them. These documents are, therefore, always tightly bound by context that makes the learnings harder to transfer or are decontextualised to the point of being apolitical. Our workbook is an **intentional attempt to zoom out, to deconstruct the programmes that seek to build feminist youth leadership, and straddle context, scale, and issues** while still providing the foundations for building something deeply localised and contextual.

In choosing this approach, we embraced the humility that comes with running what is ultimately a boutique, alternative, exploratory process in the larger scheme of things. However, **we also see this workbook and the work it attempts to capture as a deeply ambitious undertaking as it attempts to build principles and questions that move beyond the context that they were born in** to make room for a multiplicity of approaches to grow. **We believe questions, principles, and anecdotes are a far more effective tool in the hands of activists, programme designers, organisation leaders, and policymakers** than modules and curricula that restrict rather than expand ways of thinking, learning or doing.

While writing about the process, there is also an attempt to reflect on the process we undertook that we are writing about. Therefore, this is very much a **work-in-progress book.** It is designed for exploration, and for pushing practitioners beyond tired templates. It does not attempt to provide conclusive answers, but rather share an iterative set of questions to keep alive the reflexivity so tightly embedded in feminist epistemology and practice.



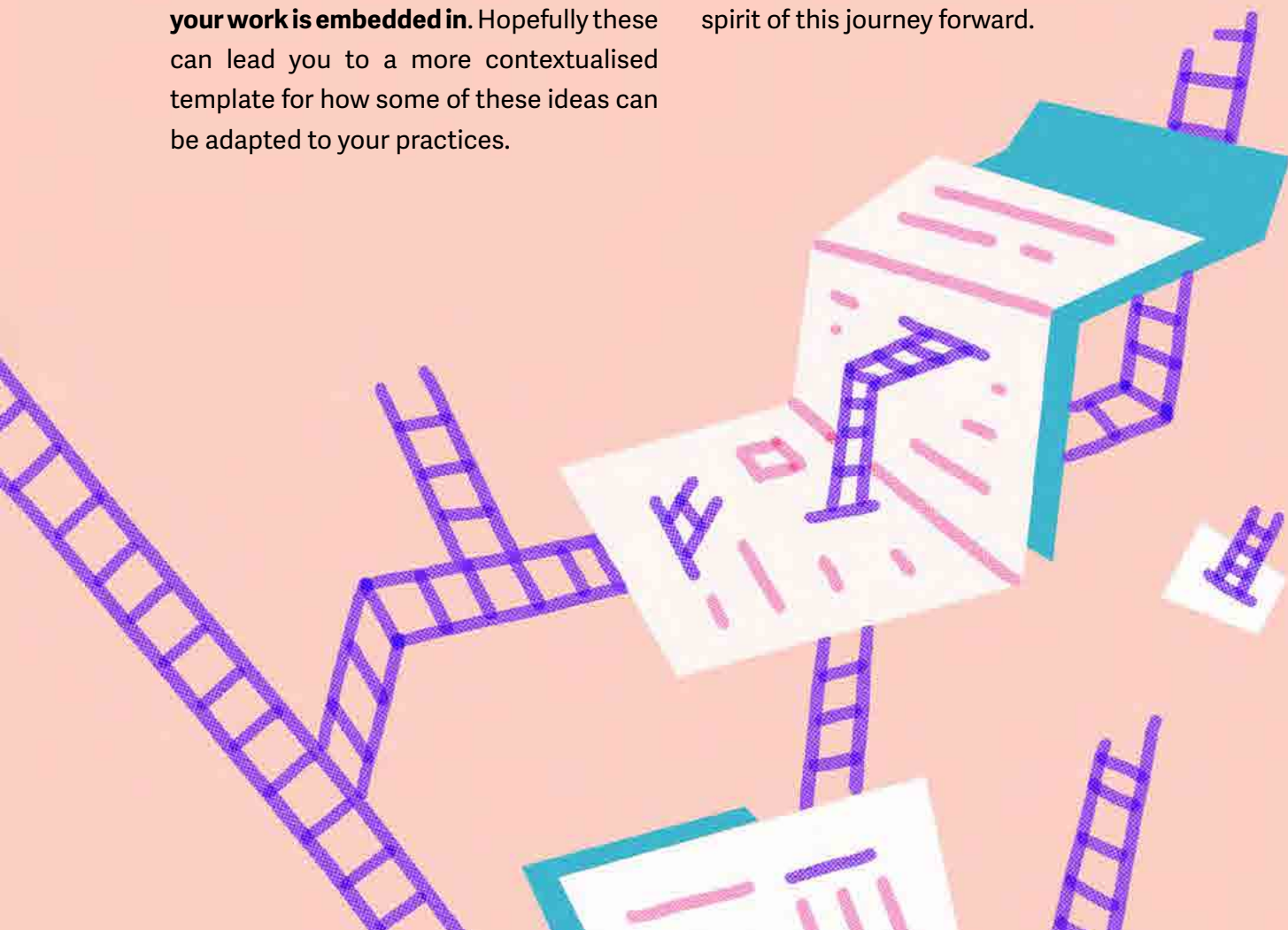
How to read the workbook?

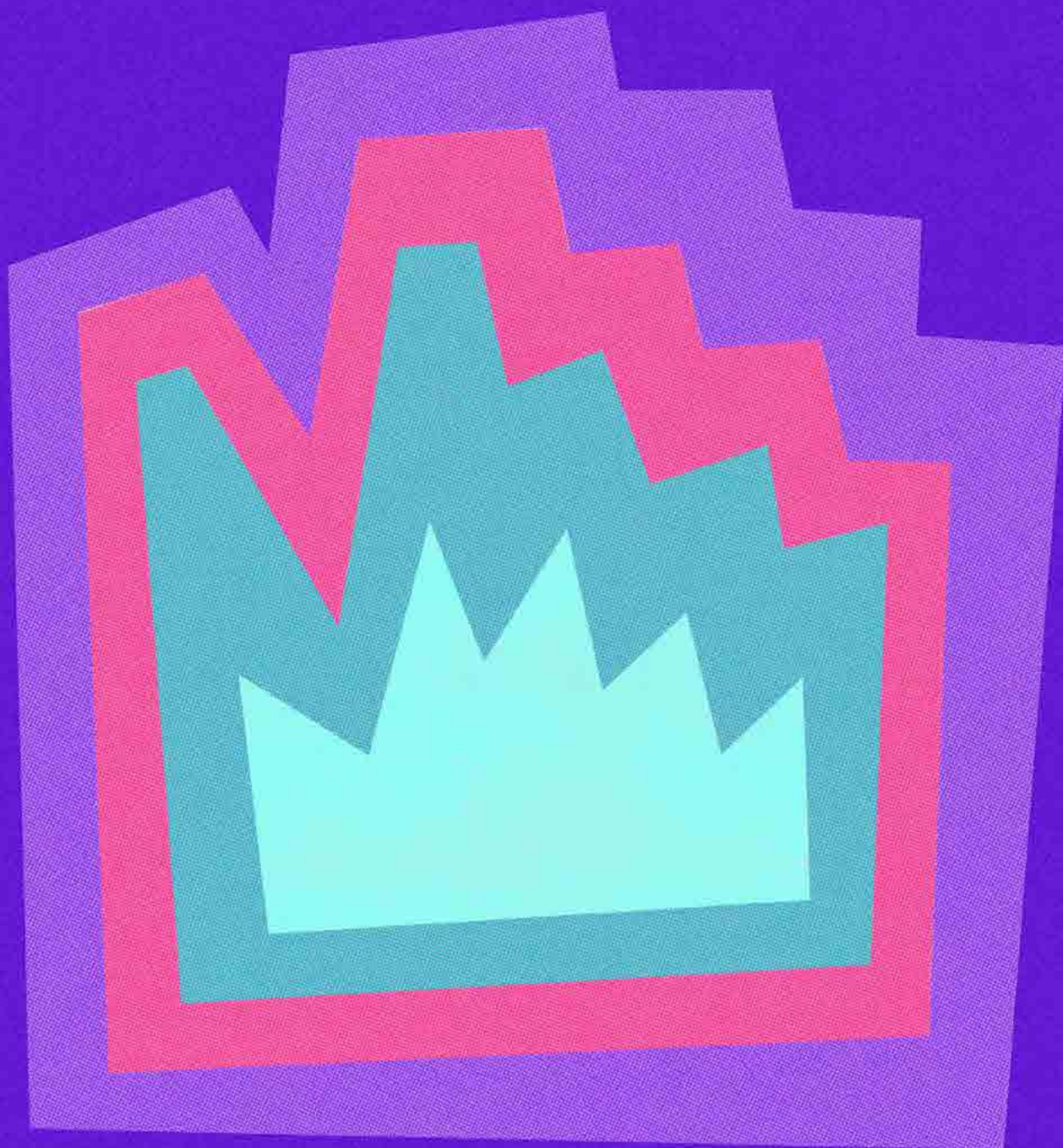
The workbook is organised in three key chapters (B1 – B3), each exploring a different aspect of designing interventions locating the context, co-creating the knowledge and pedagogy, and sustaining the work. While these sections frame the three core fundamentals of the 'doing' in the process, they are not linear. Instead of unfolding chronologically, locating, co-creating, and sustaining run as parallel threads through the project. It is in this layering that most of the nuances lie.

Each section begins with a set of questions you can workshop as individuals, in teams, or in organisations. Some are questions we asked ourselves, others are questions we were asked, and yet others are questions we wish we had asked. These questions are designed to facilitate a sharper reflection on the **what, why, and how of the realities your work is embedded in**. Hopefully these can lead you to a more contextualised template for how some of these ideas can be adapted to your practices.

The latter half of each section details the different ways in which we specifically approached these questions and the insights and further questions that emerged. There is a deliberate attempt to be self-effacing in these reflections, and to present them as a part of a continuous loop of learning with the idea that as members of a movement we owe each other stories of reflecting, learning, stumbling, and growing.

We invite you to engage, tweak, or apply this workbook in part or full as you see fit. It has been built with the generosity of several hundred people and their willingness to be open and honest with how their perspectives and experiences have evolved and transitioned while engaging with contemporary feminist youth leadership. We invite you to take the spirit of this journey forward.





Context

Our Process Principles

A4

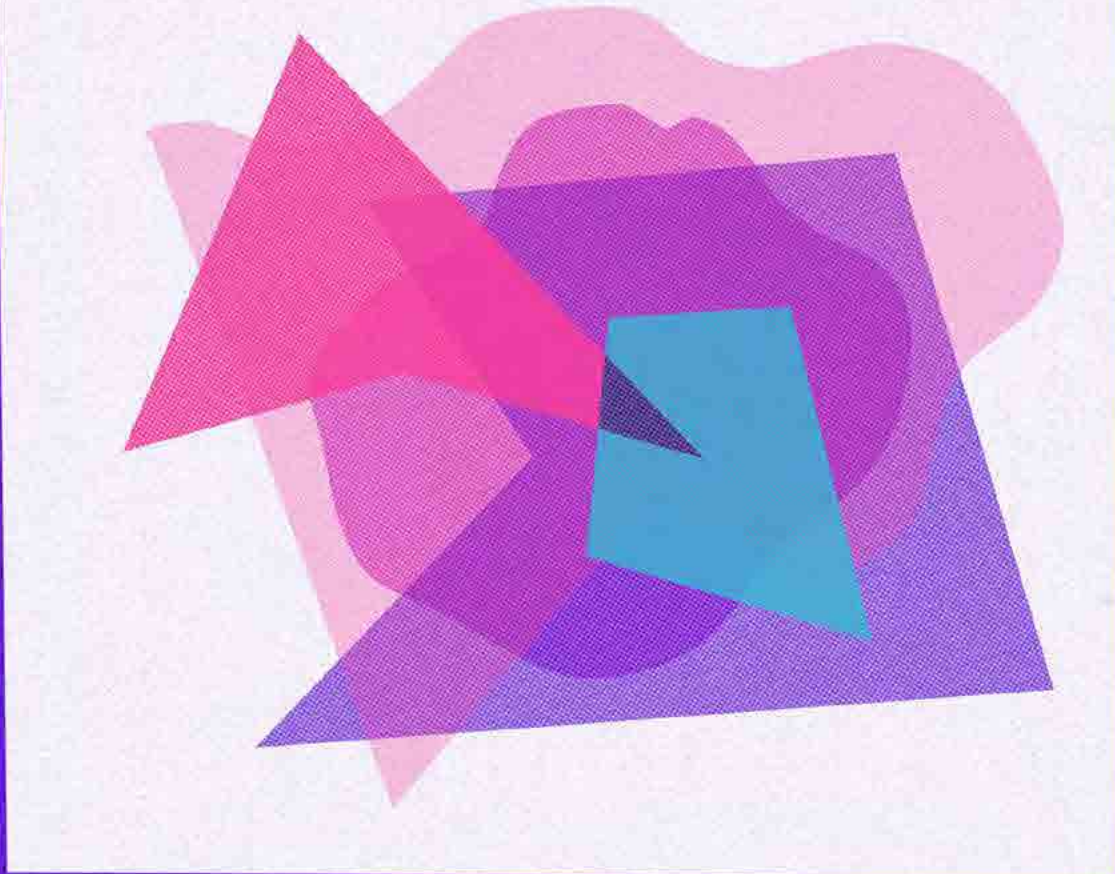
This workbook is embedded in a specific set of principles that are fundamental to our work at Gender at Work India. They are crucial for understanding how the rest of this document is detailed.

Feminist work is process-oriented and iterative



Nearly all work at Gender at Work India is grounded in the idea that the doing is not simply a road to the goal, but often the doing is the goal. This requires us to learn constantly and to consciously rid ourselves of the urgency to conclude and instead to sit with uncertainties and questions and revisit and recast ideas and concepts on the go. A spirit of exploration and experimentation also fuels an ability to understand the fundamentals and develop an ability to adapt to fast-changing landscapes and contexts while still holding on to feminist principles and values.

Change processes are slow and non-linear



There is often an inherent entitlement to change processes, where the people leading the interventions (often 'outsiders') feel some change is owed because resources and time have been spent. In contesting and often outright rejecting this notion, we are attempting to decolonise and de-brahmanise this linear rational idea of change – especially behavioural change – as something that is a given, or that happens in a vacuum. Unravelling the complex nature of change-making, and the many factors that contribute to it, we hope will keep us from celebrating mere superficial shifts and get to the heart of what it takes to reimagine and realign the building blocks of power(s) in society.

There can be no
feminist practice
without collaborative
spirit and mutual
accountability



We understand that we are not the sole arbiters or holders of knowledge, and that there is a plurality of truth, so we only grow when we collaborate with different individuals and institutions. Within these relationships, mutual accountability and respect become paramount in establishing symbiotic partnerships rather than something that remains strictly transactional.

Intersectional queer feminism moves beyond diversity and representation



We, at Gender at Work India, work with an intersectionality approach to foreground a multiplicity of identities while appreciating the importance of individual identities and experiences. Our work's aim is to shift power equations within 'leaders' and 'followers', 'decision makers', and 'implementers'. Hence, we are keen to not just build the optics of diversity by asking who is in the room, but also moving beyond to ask how this fundamentally changes the agenda and approach.

How Can We Build Processes to Strengthen Feminist Youth Leadership Towards Collective Action?

... is the question we began this project by asking. The following three sections – locating the context, co-creating pedagogy and praxis, and sustaining the work – are both the journey and the answer.

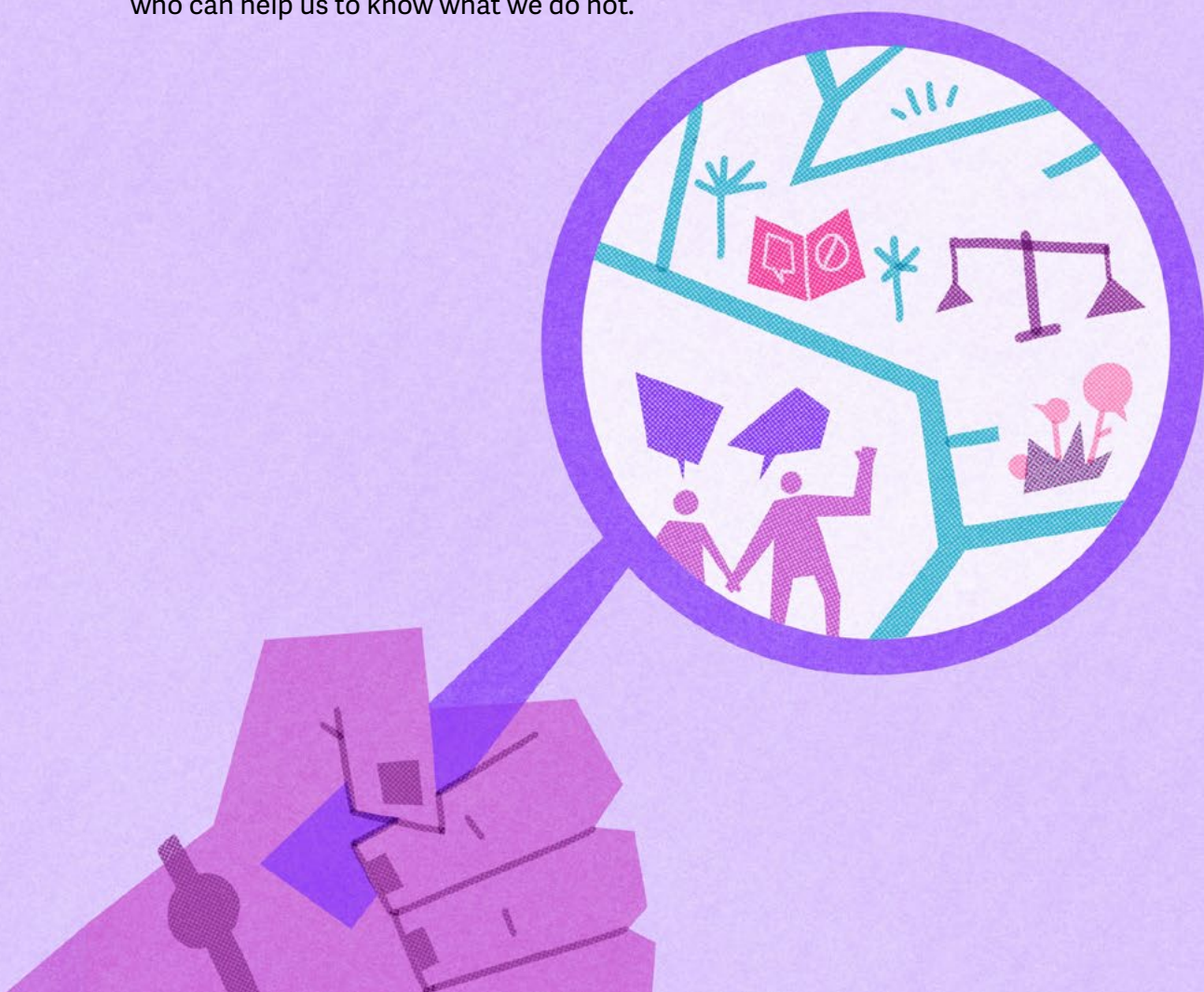
How can we build processes to strengthen feminist youth leadership towards collective action?

B1

Locate the Context

When we approached this process intervention and started asking questions about feminist youth leadership, it became increasingly clear that **our work needed to locate itself theoretically, ideologically, and regionally to be relevant, effective, and empathetic**. It was also apparent that this locating could not be reduced to simply asking where our work fit in the feminist movement or the universe of feminist practice. The **context had to be built through a combination of inward and outward processes**, from examining what exists as knowledge around feminist youth leadership through reviewing literature, to attempting a decolonised and de-brahminised conceptualisation through dialogue and reflection, to exploring how this manifests across different realities in India through conversations.

Since the context for building feminist youth leadership in India is a reality made up of complex moving parts, the process of locating feminist youth leadership in India had to expand existing ideas to make room for manoeuvring, co-creating, and sustaining the process. It had to enquire both into what we know and also what we do not know and who can help us to know what we do not.



You can begin by asking
In your context...



**How is youthhood currently understood?
What perspectives have contributed to the
conceptualisation of youthhood?**



**What is your motivation to engage with youth
leadership from a feminist perspective? How are
you uniquely positioned to take on this work?**



**Does work on this already exist? What part of
what you are building seeks to borrow from
previous work and what seeks to break away?**



**What issues and spaces are the youth most
engaged in? What spaces do they feel they
do not have access to and why?**



**What are the pervading
challenges for youth activism?**



**What hegemonic power structures
are you trying to shift through your
work with youth leaders?**

Locating the Context Through Literature and the Gaps Therein

In The Process Of Locating The Context, We Started With A Literature Review Of **Two** Specific Kinds Of Documents, Each Serving A Specific Need. **The Theoretical Literature Review Of Secondary Sources** Was Meant To Get A Sense Of How Youthhood And Feminist Leadership Have Been Understood Broadly In A More Global Sense, And Also Specifically In India And South Asia. This Exercise Also Led To Several Emerging Insights On What Voices And Experiences Were Specifically Excluded In A Mainstream Theorisation, Pushing Us To Include Them In Our Needs Assessment. Alongside **A Secondary Desk Review Of 32 Curricula, Manuals, And Toolkits** On Feminist Youth Leadership Was Also Done.

In Approaching The Theoretical Literature Review, We Were Met With A Familiar Problem: That **Much Of The Theorisation Of Concepts – Both Of Youthhood And Feminism – Continues To Follow A Dominant Global North Narrative.** Even The Literature Developed In The South Is A Response Or Reaction To The Pervasive Knowledge That Has Already Been Created In The Global North. This Led Us To Ask: **What Does Decolonising Knowledge Really Mean? Are We The Right People To Attempt To Do It?**

There Was Also A Confrontation With Academia On **What Is Legitimised As Knowledge.** So Much Of The Knowledge That Is Born From Countries In The South Is Either Reframed By The North With The Rigidity In The Conditions For Publishing Or It Resides In 'Informal' Documents Like Annual Reports, Films, Plays, Songs, Graphic Novels, And Social Media Narratives. Within The Constraints Of Time And Access, Our Theoretical Literature Review Is Also Biased Towards What Is Hegemonic Language And Knowledge, With The Acknowledgement That A Truly Feminist, Decolonised Review Of Narratives Would Have Led To Much More Nuance And Scope. It Is Work We Hope To Take On In The Time To Come.

Our Literature Review Key Insights



In 2019, the United Nations projected the world population for 2020, when 1.2 billion people would be between the ages of 15-24 years out of which 248 million will be from India. Most governmental and non-governmental agencies recognise people between the ages of 15 and 29 years as 'youth'.

Youth is considered a transition phase to a stable adult status and identity that form the basis for the rest of life.

'Youth' is construed as an abstract, universal, and homogenous commodity that is distant from the subjectivities of the young.

Crip and queer theories argue that linear age cannot be the only defining criteria that constitutes the category(ies) of youth.

Most studies that speak from the intersections of sexuality, disability, and youth come from the Global North, perhaps indicative of the dominant cultural norms that inhibit discourse on sexuality and disability in certain parts of the world.

In India, educated young people are opting to extend their years of education and delay entry into the workforce. Early initiation of children from poor income households into work practically usurps any experience of youthhood in the traditional sense. Young people are mobilised and called upon to engage in nation-building activities and the homogenisation of youth as a category masks the marginalisation and indices of social inequalities prevalent in the country.

Our Literature Review - Key Questions and Challenges

How can feminist leadership models move beyond a homogenous, heteropatriarchal, masculine interpretation of leadership styles and behaviours and be rooted in the cultural and contextual realities of youth leaders? How can we shift the discourse on power and leadership away from the current masculine frameworks of expectations of dominance, violence, and control?

How can we reimagine feminist leadership to include the more mundane, often menial and administrative work involved in mobilising and collectivising? Does this conceptualisation include the emotional labour needed to be a feminist leader?

What is the role of established leaders in the movement space to create a culture of gentle and compassionate feminist leadership? Who are the other actors who can play a critical role in fostering a culture of feminist leadership?

How do we ensure redistribution of resources necessary to challenge the status quo? How can we ensure that institutional norms are embedded in feminist principles and values?

A secondary desk review of 32 curricula, manuals, and toolkits on feminist youth leadership was done to avoid a duplication of efforts and to locate specific gaps that exist with respect to resources. Besides this, the desk review also helped in mapping the landscape of what already exists as resources for practitioners.

During the secondary research, reviewed material on feminist youth leadership, it became apparent that there were some notable limitations to the form a curriculum or manual can take. This limits the imagination of how learning and growing happens in the context of feminist youth movement-building, which sometimes scuttles the ability to think in dynamic ways that are context specific. It was during this process that the idea of this workbook was seeded as a document that is transferable and adaptable because it **generalises the principles to enable a contextualisation of action.**

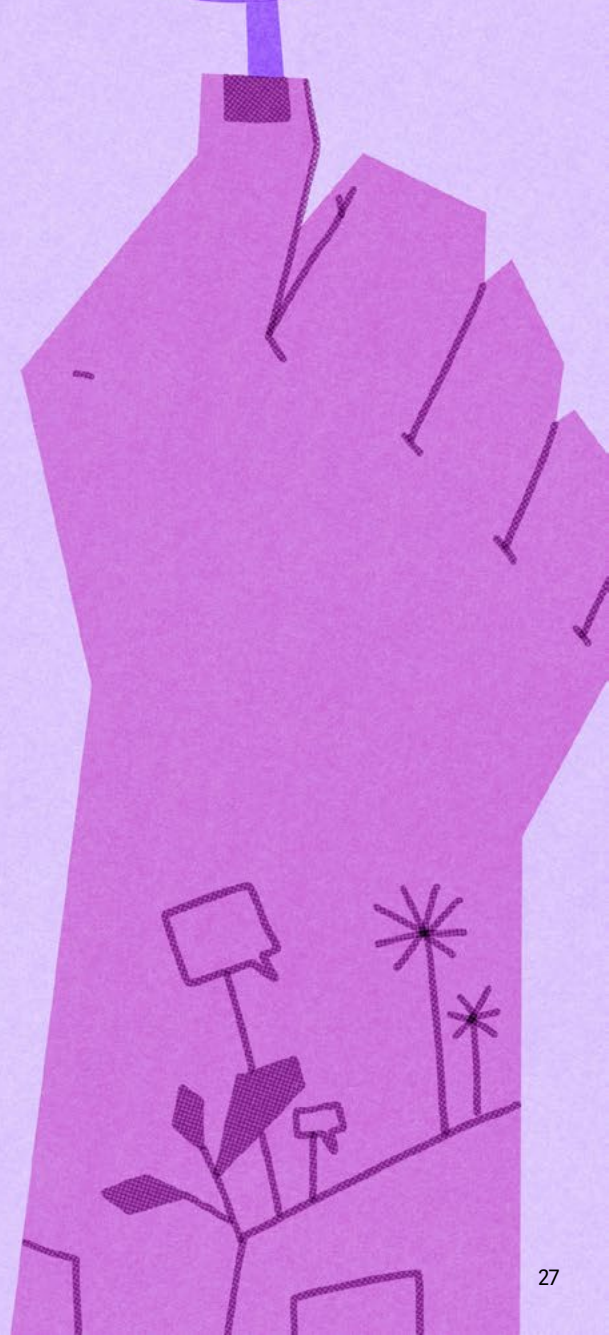
Review of curricula, manuals, and toolkits - some insights and questions raised

Most of the curricula operate from a place of finality and prescription, often adopting a patronising tone, especially when it comes to youth. Can we imagine something that engages the youth as co-creators rather than receivers of an overall end product?

In the quest to be more 'universal', a bulk of the curricula fundamentally loses out on contextual politics and decolonised ideas of leadership, feminism, and youthhood. In wanting to speak to everyone, these guides speak to no one. Can there be a living curriculum that is not bound between the pages of a book but lives in the diversified experiences of different people?

While the word intersectionality is increasingly used across curricula, an engagement with the politicised self is restricted mainly to age and gender identity markers. Caste, class, sexuality, and disability are largely absent as a lens in understanding how feminist youth leadership unfolds.

Most feminist manuals use 'women' and 'feminists' interchangeably and are almost always addressing only women in their language. How can imaginations of feminist realities move beyond this gender binary?



Locating Through Conceptualising

Conceptualising is often mistaken for arriving at definitions. Definitions shrink ideas into a box, concepts expand them. Conceptualising feminist youth leadership, therefore, has been a constant and iterative process of expanding what it means, of marrying theory with a contextual praxis, and of arriving at working ideas that are constantly re-examined as the work expands.

In some ways, our road to conceptualisation mirrored some internal dilemmas that persisted throughout the designing of the process. In wanting to walk the tightrope between certainty and abstraction, we asked ourselves: **How much do we need to know to arrive at a structure? And how much do we leave open to exploration?** Is the need to define youthhood for the sake of the work or because we have always inherited ideas as absolutes? Is feminism – as we understand it – an ideology that frames the world around it or a practice from which these ideas emerge?

One of our early steps in asking more nuanced and contextual questions on youthhood and feminist leadership in India was bringing together 16 practitioners from different parts of civil society to engage with to find out how they understood feminist youth leadership and its underlying principles, values, and contradictions. These threw up a range of questions, some general, some specific, that we revisited repeatedly over the course of the intervention process. These questions also helped us sketch out the broader contours of the concepts of youthhood, feminist leadership, and feminist youth leadership through the sharing of words and embodied experiences and their underlying challenges and tensions.



Examples of questions and cautionary notes that emerged from the virtual consultations include

How do we not think of youth as a generational category? In #MeToo, there was a real rush to break away from older institutions and establish new networks and linkages. While on the one hand there is no need to keep ourselves tied to older institutions, there is also a need to rethink the 'new' - the burden of innovation, the burden of creative enterprise, even the capacity to be enterprising are often falsely linked with a generational capacity.

Vikramaditya Sahai



Leadership is seen as being aspirational for everyone. But by virtue of belonging to a certain identity, I was thrust into leadership. I was seen as a leader before I really understood that I was one. How does our understanding of leadership evolve to include people like me?

Ghazal*



Who decides what is feminism? And what is this movement? Who are the makers of the rules and conventions? And if we are deciding, then how do we make sure it doesn't become the same as 'movements' being run by the people we are resisting?

Akkai Padmashali



We, as a society, are being pushed towards being non-plural and young people are being used as a tool for pushing this anti-plural agenda, whether it is in riot mobs, in university settings, in sustained online trolling...if we are to think of more self-determined, more feminist, more systemic leadership building, then we need to think of the values of social justice and locate them very centrally.

Roshni Nuggehalli



*Name changed to protect identity

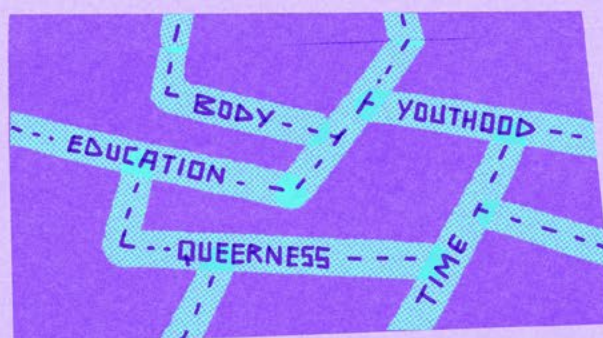
Current conceptualisations of youthhood, youth leadership, and feminist leadership (an extract from the white paper)

Youth and Youthhood

The United Nations," For statistical purposes, defines those persons between the ages of 15 and 24 as youth without prejudice to other definitions by Member States (United Nations, 2013)." However, the United Nations also recognises that the "definition of youth perhaps changes with circumstances, especially with the changes in demographic, financial, economic, and socio-cultural settings; however, the definition that uses the **15- 24 age cohort as youth** fairly serves its statistical purposes for assessing the needs of the young people and providing guidelines for youth development (United Nations, 2013)". **This working definition limits the agency and history of marginalised youth as it is fundamentally located in the systemic, linear, heteronormative, and brahmanical definition of youth and assumed to be experienced collectively.** Post the industrial revolution, when capitalism got enmeshed with colonisation, followed by globalisation, neoliberal discourses supported the normalisation of a linear and rational conceptualisation of time as a singular way of experiencing time.

The history of South Asia, particularly of indigenous and marginalised communities was embedded in **crip time** even before the terminology was coined in the 1970s in disability studies. As we were going to engage with marginalised feminist youth leaders, it was significant for us to embed

ourselves and the entire process in **crip time – a framework that allows greater agency and space to such diverse leaders across many lived realities in the country.**



As we challenged this normativity of time we grappled for months with **'age' being the primary identifier of youthhood** as it not only invisibilises the experiences of marginalised bodies but also ignores the socio-cultural realities of the Global South. With a high incidence of child labour, early marriages, and late entrants into higher education, conventional definitions of youth neither hold nor respond to how youthhood arrives or shrinks significantly based on socio-geographical and cultural experiences. Research continues to show that disabled and marginalised communities experience time differently than their abled, cis heteronormative, and dominant caste peers. As we struggled in applying these concepts, we became clearer in the ways to articulate and strengthen an important link between **crip time** and reimagination of youth programmes in the Indian context.

Hence, the concepts of 'crip time' and 'queer time' address the unique relationships that individuals have with the passage of time, often needing more time and accommodation than their able-bodied, privileged counterparts to perform a variety of functions. Therefore, instead of "forcing everybody into the normative structure of time, crip time asks to 'bend the clock' to include more people in spaces and processes."

The attempt to define youthhood as a societal, personal, and demographic category all rolled into one.

Youth Leadership

Drawing from our conceptualisation of youthhood, our definition of youth leadership seeks to imbue youth leadership with specific traits – dynamism, a spirit of exploration, and an inherent sense of seeking meaning and authenticity. Youth leadership, as we see it, is interested in expanding the embodied experience of youthhood for more and more people and for those people to experience time as non-linear. Youth leadership is keen on injecting the systems around it with more of an ability to be open, exploratory, and inclusive.



While demographic categorisations take chronological age as the primary (and implicitly homogenous) indicator, the societal (when and how society perceives you as young) and the personal (when you feel young) are constantly shifting landscapes. Therefore, we treated **youthhood not as an absolute, rigid category bound by age and 'eligibility criteria', but one that is marked by self-identified youthhood as it may arrive for the marginalised and those with disabilities, however expanded or shrunken its definition may be.**

Feminist Leadership

Feminist leadership stands in opposition to a traditional, top-down, patriarchal leadership. It is envisioned as compassionate, collaborative, relational, mindful, self-reflexive, and transformative. It fosters the collective by acknowledging and addressing matters of social justice through identifying and surfacing underlying causes of social and interpersonal conflicts. It is also deeply interested in power and its origins - in consistently challenging the places where it is centralised and consciously working to redistribute and equalise power in every setting.

Feminist youth leadership for us is an intersectional leadership imbued with the attributes of youthhood and the values of feminism.

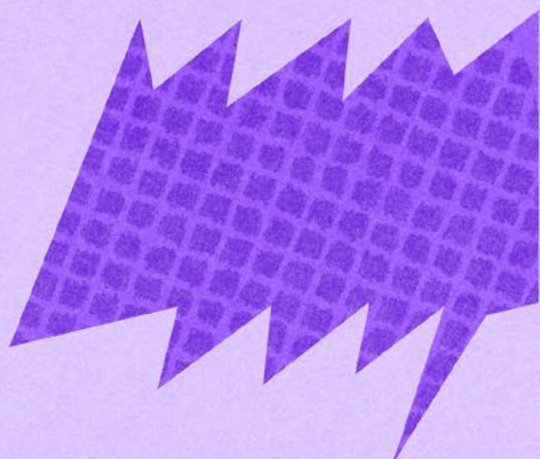
Locating Through Exploration


Team that led the research and writing of the literature review and needs assessment: Ketaki Hate and Parvathy J.

While locating the context through literature and concept we consistently came up against the idea that the basic understanding of youthhood, feminism, and leadership are still dominated by normative narratives from the Global North. **Decolonising and de-brahmanising means not just populating existing traditional moulds with new narratives but recasting these moulds completely through radical intersectional feminist narratives.**

However, even in the Global South there are hegemonic knowledge structures that dictate what is seen as the truth and what is not. There is an upper-caste, upper-class, heteropatriarchal, urban gaze that frames youthhood and leadership so we were clear that we had to be intentional in curating where these narratives come from.

To set the outer limits of this enquiry, we grappled with the idea of **how to have a representative sample of respondents.** Having defined youthhood as embodied and self-determined, what parameters should we use for recognising who qualifies as youth? Given that this exploration was also into how youthhood was experienced and defined by those who identified with it, we did not have fixed parameters in the form of attributes. So, we expanded the normative age limit in both directions putting together the range of 15-35 years, and making it malleable on both ends to include respondents outside this age range who self-identified as youth.





Following this, we conducted **24 in-depth one-on-one interviews with individuals from across the country who identified themselves as youth leaders.** Their identities spanned regions, religions, castes, sexualities, genders, and classes. They were associated with formal and informal organisations, collectives, and movements. Some, we reached out to directly. Others came recommended by those we spoke with. We were consistently purposive in this sampling – expanding the idea of workplaces and leadership beyond formal NGOs and their upper management. This was also a **conscious choice to break out of an NGO-ised understanding of the feminist movement and leadership** and to locate the movement across the many different institutions that keep it going. We also recognised the importance of including cis men as part of this cohort who saw themselves as allies of the women’s movement but struggled to express their feminism.

The challenges of **contesting the dominance of leaders of the anglophone social movement** who often expressed themselves in academic parlance also prompted us to consciously include a revolving set of interviewers, translators, and transcribers across different languages. Though we still run the risk of much of the nuance getting lost in the translation to English, but these conversations are preserved in their original languages to enable us to circle back to them for resources we may create in different Indian languages.

These **conversations were inherently exploratory in nature.** We asked the participants to engage with the idea of youthhood and leadership in their context. What feminism meant to them and what it takes to keep building this work. These explorations into practitioners’ lives, their work, their journeys, and their beliefs created a rich tapestry of thoughts and ideas from which to start the process of recasting the moulds that frame feminist youth leadership in pervasive imagination.

Insights from the needs assessment


1. Why is a focus on youth leadership from marginalised communities important for the feminist movement in India?

It emerged that it was essential to work with youth leaders engaged in social change because many of them are invisibilised or their opinions ignored in the spaces of movements or policymaking forums. In particular, youth leaders from marginalised groups experienced discrimination and exclusion from these spaces even though the outcomes of their labour were often appropriated by people from dominant groups. At the same time, youth leaders, especially since 2016, have played a critical role in rising against divisive politics, generational oppression, and inequities. Evidence of the importance of youth led social activism can be seen in the mobilisation and protests steered by student leaders across academic universities in India.

2. Why is an intersectional lens critical?

Participants contended that to truly embody a feminist praxis to leadership development, it was imperative to employ an intersectional lens. Youth leaders of different genders, ethnicities, castes, classes, and sexual orientations re-emphasised the need to use an intersectional approach to encompass their wide range of experiences of exclusion and struggles against structures of power. This emphasis on an intersectional approach reaffirmed the need to create learning spaces for youth leaders with different backgrounds which offered them an opportunity to understand each other and their roles and positionality within the movement. Construction of these feminist spaces was also required to let individuals acknowledge their gendered privileges and interrogate their powers.



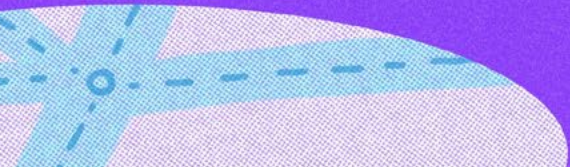
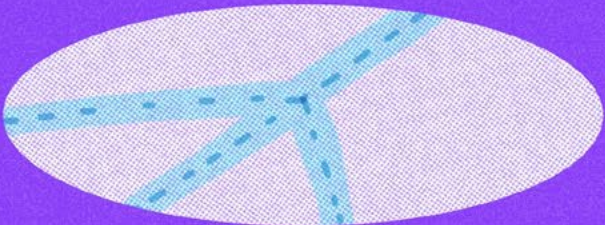
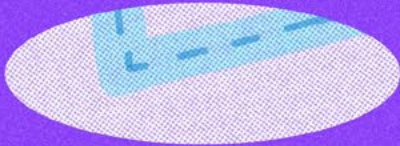
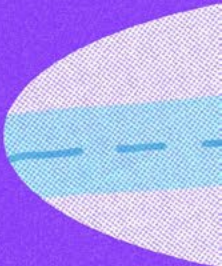


3. What kind of leadership and leadership-building processes are important for furthering movement-building?

The needs assessment also underlined the importance of conceptualising a leadership development programme that built on the lived experiences of the co-creators or the cohort. This conceptualisation had to be foregrounded in the context of their activism in the current political environment as well as resistance to historical oppression. **A key narrative that emerged was the need to prioritise the collective over individuals without which movements cannot be sustainable.**

4. What kind of resources does it take to build a feminist youth movement?

The needs assessment highlighted that in the absence of sufficient resources for movement-building work, many activists have to work in a project mode that does not allow the challenging of the status quo or existing power hierarchies.



How can we build processes to strengthen feminist youth leadership towards collective action?

B2

Co-Creating Perspectives and Pedagogy

Of the many objectives that feminist youth leadership can build, our work is most concerned with collective action and intersectional movement-building. This work is also a microcosm of the movement at large engaging with differing contexts, realities, and identities and attempting to bring them together in ideation and action.

Co-creation, therefore, becomes both a principle and praxis in this journey. And who we co-create with, where this co-creation happens, and how the space for co-creation is held become the primary building blocks of this process.

We recognise that the opportunity to do this work is rare as spaces to come together and to develop tools of co-creation are polarised and shrinking. Intersectionality, solidarity, and allyship are complex and born out of longitudinal iterative engagements with the idea of movement-building but collectives are not born overnight. Hence, to be able to sit with some of these processes, to think through their principles, to try and 'do' things in small ways and big, however painful and uncomfortable is both a pressing need and a privilege.



You can begin by asking
In your context...



**How do you arrive at the framing of youthhood and leadership?
Who is missing in this narrative?**



**What is the pedagogical normativity that exists around the work you are doing?
Are there people who are challenging your work? How do you account for them?**



Are there people beyond your sector who you can think of as collaborators to help you stretch your creative muscles? What preparations will enable these collaborations?



When you think of knowledge and pedagogies, can you think of what you can borrow from, what you need to completely rethink, and what you can create anew?



Who has historically engaged with the process of creating the knowledge and pedagogies that you work with? Can you find alternate ways of subverting that?

Identifying Youth Co-Creators

Early on in the process of reviewing literature and engaging in conversations, a refrain that emerged was that most resources being built for young people were being built by those who considered themselves more 'experienced' thus immediately casting youthhood as inexperienced, and as the age of being groomed into adulthood. There was a patronising undertone that ran through these texts as it failed to recognise youth as individuals with something to bring to the table.

Those resources that were led by the youth were almost exclusively upper-caste, upper-class, cisgendered, heterosexual, and able-bodied in their representation, making a whole spectrum of experiences of youthhood, and therefore youth leadership, invisible.

It therefore became essential to bring a diverse cohort of self-identifying youth on board as collaborators in our process. Originally, youth leaders were imagined in a far more limited capacity in the process, even within the bounds of collaboration – as people who would engage with content we had already developed and help tweak it further. However, the review of curricula and the findings from the needs assessment brought out the **importance and urgency of seeing youth as co-creators throughout the process** rather than in select piecemeal ways.

Selection processes can often be severely limiting and the aesthetics of who 'appears' the right fit can often lean into meritocracy, however unintentional. While we could

not be sure that we were safeguarding our process from implicit bias rendered by our own identities and experiences, we tried to be conscious so as to build processes to actively counter this.

For starters, **we decided against an age limit.** Our literature review showed that youthhood was a shifting embodied experience that could not be reduced to age. So, we asked, 'Do you think of yourself as a young leader?' followed by, 'Why? Or why not?' It was a conscious unlearning of our own entry points of thinking about youthhood primarily through the prism of age and experience and **co-creating new definitions on the go with the nearly 300 people that applied** to the Feminist Youth Leadership Programme (FYLP).

Additionally, **while intersectionality cannot be reduced to diverse representations, diversity is definitely an important step in getting there.** We consciously built a diversity of geographical representation across India with equal numbers from each region knowing how important cultural context is in framing the issue. However, since the application form was in only two languages (Hindi and English), we understand that this severely limited who could participate and what voices would reach us.

Beyond the geographical, we also tried to ensure that a diversity of identities, approaches, and contexts were represented in the cohort. To ensure that this 'diversity' didn't simply come from a singular lens, we invited over 10 external panellists each representing a multitude

of identities and perspectives to be a part of the final conversations before the cohort was finalised. These conversations, seemingly a small part of the bureaucratic work of 'arriving at' a final cohort, became spaces of exploration, of vulnerability, and of trying to locate the heart and goal of the process. This, in some ways, started laying down the processes of co-creation – that the holders of space might come in with questions, but that these would be malleable to what that conversation and the people involved needed.

Fundamentally, the selection process was simply an answer to: **Who do we invite to the co-creation space? And how does this inviting happen so that we move from diversity to intersectionality?** More than the 'perfect candidate', we were looking for someone who would be a good fit for the idea and ethos of co-creation. Someone who:



- Was able to think of what they could offer to the space. Not just a 'session', but a perspective, a skill, a song, a spirit and could talk about what they were seeking to gain from it.

- Was able to think of how this process of co-creation could translate into mobilising/organising work in their own collectives/organisations.

- Was able to make room for a multiplicity of ideas/ approaches and was coming with a collaborative spirit.

- Wasn't afraid to push ideas of normativity including within feminist discourses and praxis and bring the politics of their identity and location to further nuance the movement spaces that they were a part of.



Expanding Tools of Co-Creation and Co-Learning

Like most other sectors with rich and textured histories, even the development sector has a tendency to fall into familiar, comfortable modes of operation. Primary among these is **how learning is designed**. It is nearly always led by substance: 'What is it that we want people to learn?' only later followed by, 'How do people learn?' often lending a linearity to experience and learning in a way that can often be restrictive and exclusionary.

Early in the process, a team member, an artist, asked us: **Must substance always guide form? Can we think of a way to expand our pedagogies? Who can we invite to rethink this with us?**

And thus, the idea of the **artists' workshop** was born. We invited ten practitioners in an intimate setting to collectively think of various forms and practices for developing an alternative pedagogy for building feminist youth leadership. From poets and body movement practitioners to visual artists, theatre activists, and rappers we invited key artists from different parts of the country whose work is embedded in communities but more importantly in building collectives.

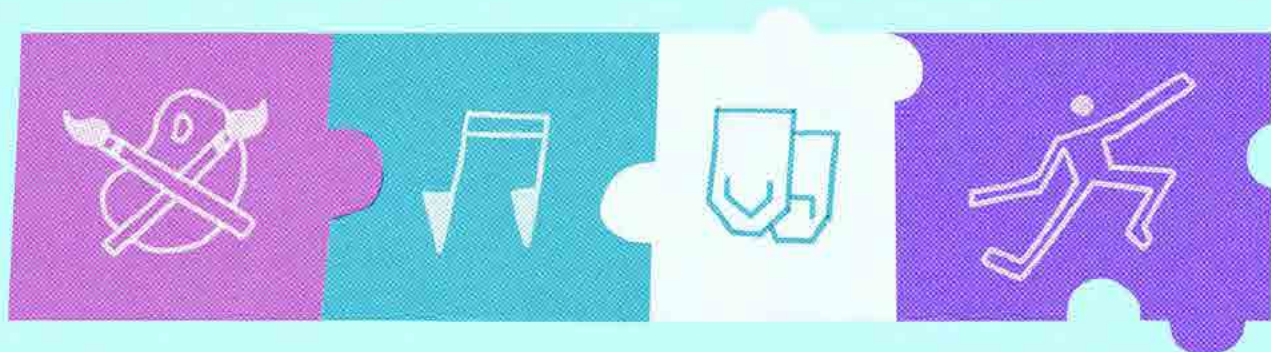
Through this extensive exercise we also wanted to build intentional interlinkages between art and political resistance and dialogue. We wanted to sharpen our collective understanding on how these artists are engaging with the idea of political collectivising, resistance, feminism, youthhood, and leadership in their art, how are they doing it differently, and what is it that we can learn with them.

We were keen for the artists to engage with the emerging ideas in the project in two slightly different ways: in their practice and as practitioners. We asked them what of their current practice could inform how learning can happen for leadership building, but we also socialised the emerging ideas of co-creation, feminist leadership, youthhood, movements, and the gatekeeping of all these spaces with them as individual practitioners.

Over the course of four days, we talked, explored boundaries, flailed about, painted, sang songs, and found newer ways of asking old questions. It was a reminder of how few spaces of cross-sectoral learning remained. One of the artists asked, **why are artists only seen as sidekicks to movement-building? As people who will contribute to its aesthetics and reach but not to activism and movement building?**

Though just a beginning, the artists' workshop hopefully lays a foundation for thinking more fluidly about spaces of young feminist leadership and movement building. It asks important questions of where we are in our movements' journeys. With the growing professionalisation of the development sector, **is activism also increasingly being seen as a job?** Does this then make activism for social change exclusive only for development professionals? How do we expand the world of movement builders rather than constantly shrinking it?

Initiatives like the artists' workshop are also the beginning of our own learning journey. It would be a folly to load a four-day process with the expectation of flipping the normative script, but it can start to lay the questions that slowly crack the normative wall. The artists' workshop is the first of many attempts to try and build cross-sectoral relationships that move beyond transactions of ideas and aesthetics and move into spaces of mutual learning, growth, and community-building.



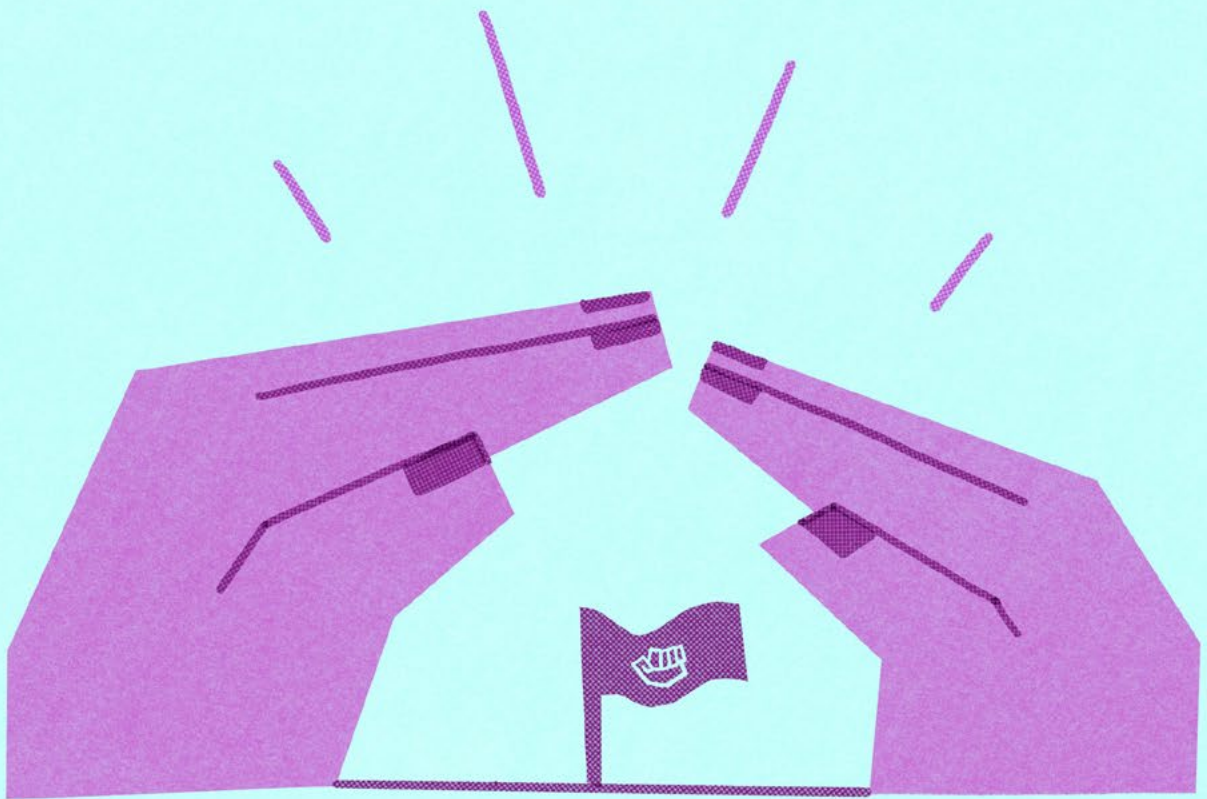
Holding Space for Co-Creation

Holding space is a key feminist value that we tried to implement throughout the journey of this process intervention. As easy as it is to use and overuse the term 'holding space', its practice even in progressive feminist spaces is incredibly challenging and demanding.

Holding space is a soft, tender, gentle feminist practice of care to allow people, groups, and communities to recognise their individual and collective powers. It is through an active practice of grounding, self-reflection, and setting healthy boundaries that someone can step into holding space for people.

Holding space works with a submission of one's judgements, doubts, fears, and anxieties as fuel for the transformation of collective assertions, dialogue, and resistance. **Only when facilitators, individuals, groups, and communities truly learn to manage their own fears, anxieties, anger, grief, and hurt and when they learn to affirm their own capacities, limitations, roles, and ambitions are they able to create spaces individually or collectively for others in compassionate ways.**





One of the specific ways in which we held a space in this process was through two **Feminist Leadership Labs** - one held in August and the other in November as a continuum process with the **27 youth we had identified as co-creators**. These labs were as much about **learning what it takes to hold space for co-creation** as they were about actually co-creating ideas.

The following sections are a glimpse into the processes that we used for the holding space and the lessons embedded therein.

The Feminist Leadership Lab In preparation

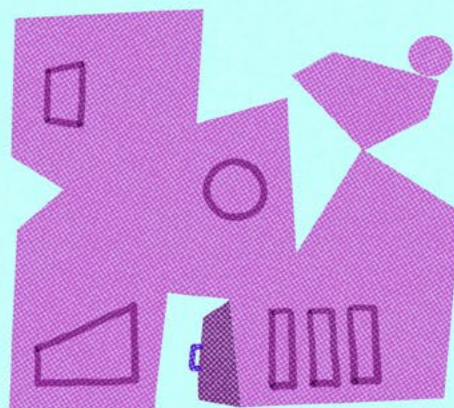
Between January and July 2022, in the seven months leading up to the first Feminist Leadership Lab, we had already co-created several ideas and pedagogies on feminist youth leadership through the literature review, needs assessment, and artists' workshop. The labs were seen as a way to put into action some of these ideas towards movement-building.

We asked ourselves: **What will the space of the labs try to hold? What are the labs trying to create?** Called 'labs' to communicate the spirit of exploration and experimentation located within the idea of co-creation, they were meant to hold whatever questions the cohort chose to ask of themselves, and also hold the space for engaging with them.

We agreed to some basic principles to enable the delicate process of holding:

Dissolving binaries between the 'expert' and the 'receiver':

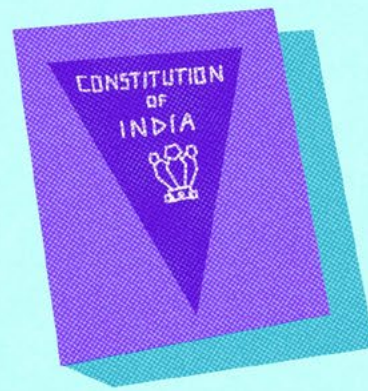
The labs were imagined as a space that would be cohort-led, even if the organising was being done by Gender at Work India. This built on one of the principles of collective processes that we all come in as givers as well as receivers, and that hierarchies of knowledge production only get in the way of solidarity building. Expertise is also contextual and fluid, and when seen as such, allows for 'leadership' to also be a shifting role rather than a centralised power.



Making room to participate in non-normative ways:

The labs were imagined as spaces with plenty of room to breathe, that played with 'offline' forms of engagement and learning, and a design that made room for synchronous and asynchronous forms, as well as verbal/non-verbal forms. This was intended as a slower cadence and a chance for people to learn/share/connect in different ways and at different paces.

Fundamental to the labs was also the idea **that the feminist leadership journey cannot be singular**. It must be seen and experienced as a collective - almost as a resistance to the neoliberal framing of a leader as a singular, pedestalled person. Forging connections, solidarity, and exploring collective care against the current climate of deep polarisation was seen to be critical to the process of (co) learning.



In addition, the labs also sought to be **safe spaces to be political**, to ask the questions that plague us, to question one another, to learn together, and build tools of resistance against different hegemonic power structures.

A crucial aspect of the holding space for co-creators started before the first lab. During the one-on-one interviews, we began **socialising the idea of co-creation**, of how we were imagining it would unfold during the labs and inviting interviewees to build their own conceptualisations of what it would take to co-create with us. The emerging insights from these conversations also fed into the design of the first lab and how it would hold co-creation.

It was early in the design process that **a tension between different polarities really started surfacing**. Between **structure and abstraction, control and chaos**. This led us to keep revisiting the questions: What of this tension came from our innermost individual and collective needs? What of it can we resolve within ourselves and what of it needs to be surfaced with the team? Is resolution really what we seek, or is sitting with the tension and working through it more crucial?

In the final stretch before the lab while putting together the design, those who were experienced with running open space processes asked us: **How can the space be open to co-creation till the holders of the space are completely transparent with what they already know in this journey?** A reminder that the holders of the space of co-creation also need to lead with vulnerability and transparency. So, we got to work on curating insights, the questions gathered, and challenges faced in the whole process, inviting artists to visually interpret words and quotes, organising them around the questions we had been asking ourselves through this process:

Why is it important for youth to re-envision leadership from a feminist lens? What is their role in this process?

What does the movement mean for me?

**What do we identify as resources?
How do we resource ourselves?**

How do we resist, rest, and rejuvenate collectively? What does collective care look like to us?

**How do we work with each other?
How do we come together in meaningful ways?**

How do we
reconcile with /
move past conflicts
and contradictions
to create solidarity?

How do we
continue to
engage beyond
the lab? What are
we together for?

What does it mean
to be an ally?



FIRST
FEMINIST
LAB



In the first lab

Facilitation team for the first lab:
Sudarsana Kundu and Manishikha Baul.

In our quest to understand how to give structure to some of the 'open' processes we were seeking to hold in the lab, two resource persons suggested that we should explore Open Space technology, a method that has been used in group settings for over three decades now. This is a tool used with large groups that need to come together over specific questions in a self-guided, self-organised manner.

It operates around four core principles:

- **Whenever it starts is the right time**
- **Whoever comes is the right people**
- **Whatever happens is the only thing that could have**
- **When it's over, it's over**

We researched the tool and felt it was one of the few tools that really responded to the design principles we had laid out, and that in some ways it summarised and structured an approach we had already been adopting. However, we felt it prudent not to stick to its many structures pedantically, but to let the four open space principles (mentioned previously in the workbook), guide the space and our own sense of control and chaos. We believed it was crucial to let go of the idea of a deeply

facilitated process and trust that the group would have agency of its own to shape the lab and the questions it was seeking to answer, however laborious that process may be.

There were elements of open space that we had experimented with in the artists' workshop - coming in with an open agenda, shifting the agenda on the basis of the participants, and working with flexible time that expanded and shrunk to fit the need and the mood. We expanded the first Feminist Leadership Lab to **27 people over seven days**; at once, a daunting and exciting undertaking. We didn't overload the process with too many expectations. We simply imagined it as a way to **lay the foundation for new connections and possibilities**. A take-off point for community-building, but not an end in itself.

Through the first three days, the cohort reshaped the question that they felt was the most pertinent to ask of themselves as a group going forward:

**What will it take for us
the youth in this room
to rethink, reimagine,
and recreate leadership
and our movement
from a value-based and
intersectional feminist
lens, maintaining
interconnectedness
with other movements?**

The answers emerged in entangled, charged, often draining ways. The elements of open space - morning news, evening news, and the marketplace - provided a scaffolding for some of the answers to emerge. The marketplace was a physical white board that held the different session offerings that every co-creator would make. These were offered through a small pitch, which ran in parallel in different rooms, and could be negotiated to be moved, expanded or removed by the group during the marketplace every day. The morning news was a way to check in with the group every morning, and the evening news was a space for the group to report back to each other on the progress made towards the central question in the different sessions through the day.

However, the discomfort with the process started showing early. For one, it became increasingly clear that the political situation we are all embedded in is urgent and there is a dire need for collective hope. But, simultaneously, the increasing violence on marginalised communities makes protecting and asserting personal identities important. There were, therefore, two competing forces in constant conflict over the seven days: the desire for collective care and action, and the desire to protect personal identities and issues from getting diffused in the collective.

In a space so open and vulnerable, there were also deep fissures over politics, interpersonal dynamics, identity, and ways of doing. Energies were deeply strained with co-creators offering sessions late into the day and with many feeling the need to attend everything they could. Rest time spilled late into the night, inevitably messing with start times the next morning.

Parallel to this was **a building angst against the organisers and facilitators**. In an open space where most of the decisions were left to the cohort, there was still an innate expectation for a facilitator to step in to resolve conflicts, keep time, and carve out time for rest. As facilitators, we argued over how much space we were taking up, and the apparently blurring lines between control and chaos.

However, through the discomfort the lab also reiterated the need for these spaces where young people can come together, set their own questions, foreground the tensions that run as undercurrents in our movement spaces, question and call in one another, and build one-on-one relationships that can further collaborations. It was, after all, a microcosm of larger collective building processes where disparate strands of experiences, identities, and praxis find a way to come together in solidarity and allyship. Even in the middle of the process, **it felt like this was the real, painful work we all had to do to come together despite ourselves.**



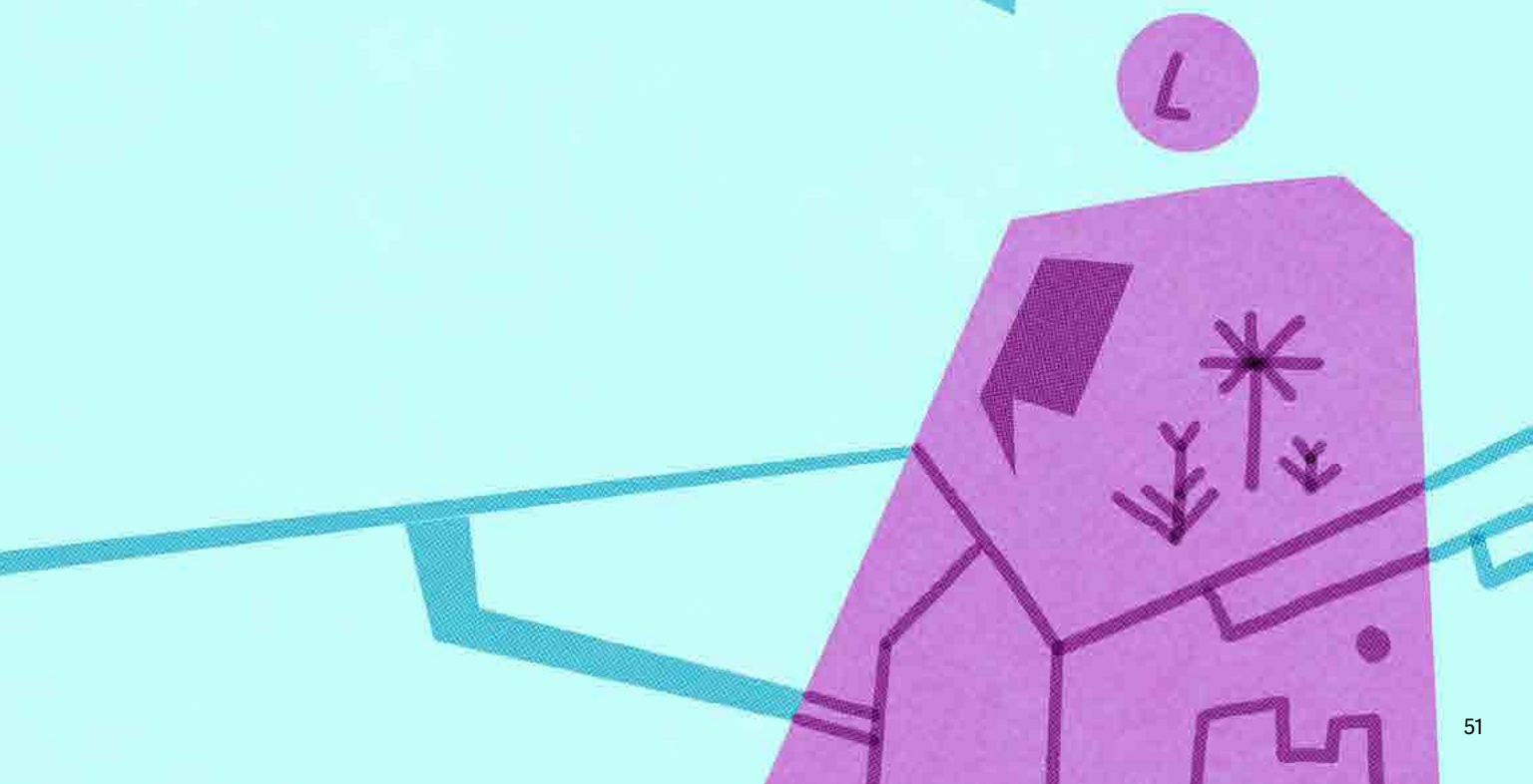
Observation at the lab, Parvathy noted

It must be mentioned that open, vulnerable conversations in and out of the sessions did impact the cohort. As the days passed, there were slow, intentional attempts to move beyond individualistic ideas of leadership and movement, to those of a sense of collective solidarity. Participants shared about themselves realistically, broke down, laughed together about injustices, and sat together in silence.

This emotionality formed a bridge through which people coming from different backgrounds and experiences could find and reach out to each other. Even if they did not understand the exact specificity of their peer's experience, they were able to hold space for each other. Sessions and informal get-togethers were planned around the comfort of their peers, and through the course of the lab several participants reflected and acknowledged their shortcomings and reached out to repair relationships. This shift was prominent, especially in the sessions towards the end of the lab where the cohort discussed practical ways of sharing resources and supporting each other in their journeys, and envisioning shared goals and action plans.

The fem lab was a space for collective churning for the cohort and for Gender at Work India. Having engaged with each other and the central question for seven days, there are more questions about feminist praxis within movements than answers. However, each question that comes up shines a light on possible ways of doing feminism and working towards justice while staying rooted in one's context.

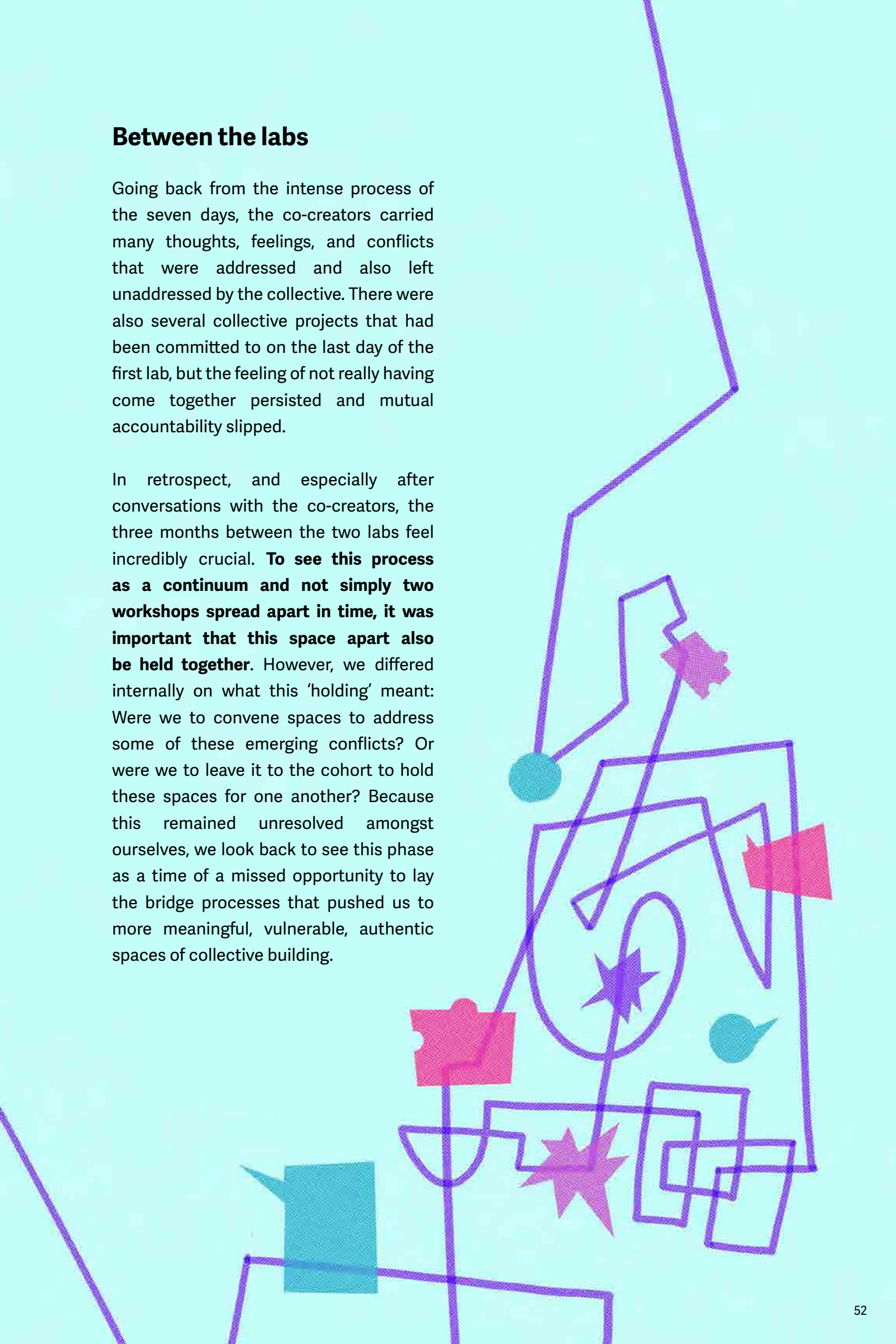
working towards justice while staying rooted in one's context.



Between the labs

Going back from the intense process of the seven days, the co-creators carried many thoughts, feelings, and conflicts that were addressed and also left unaddressed by the collective. There were also several collective projects that had been committed to on the last day of the first lab, but the feeling of not really having come together persisted and mutual accountability slipped.

In retrospect, and especially after conversations with the co-creators, the three months between the two labs feel incredibly crucial. **To see this process as a continuum and not simply two workshops spread apart in time, it was important that this space apart also be held together.** However, we differed internally on what this 'holding' meant: Were we to convene spaces to address some of these emerging conflicts? Or were we to leave it to the cohort to hold these spaces for one another? Because this remained unresolved amongst ourselves, we look back to see this phase as a time of a missed opportunity to lay the bridge processes that pushed us to more meaningful, vulnerable, authentic spaces of collective building.



In the second lab

Facilitation team for the second lab: Jyotsna Siddharth, Manishikha Baul, Vikramaditya Sahai and Taranga Sriraman.

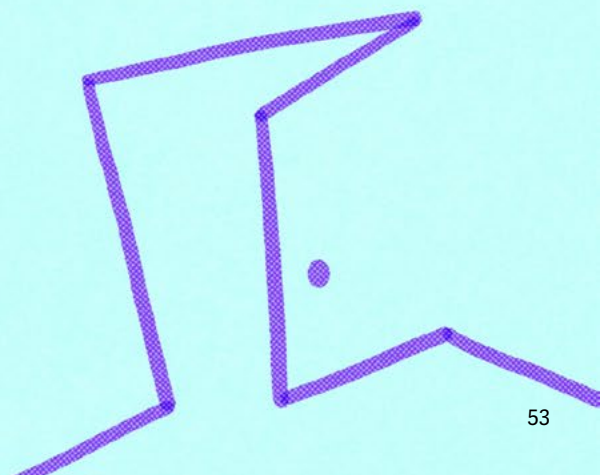
The second Feminist Lab, also referred to as the Culmination Lab, was held in November 2022. It immediately became apparent that it needed to focus on reflecting on the first lab, the time in-between, and the feelings the co-creators were sitting with. Additionally, there was also a need to collectively unpack power, accountability, and resource mobilisation.

Gender at Work India prepared and presented a design for the four-day workshop and requested the co-creators to weigh in on how it should roll out. Some people in the cohort came together to form a design team which presented the approaches, perspectives, and themes that they wanted to cover during the Culmination Lab. We then consolidated the two designs to create a final design that was greenlit by the co-creators as the plan for the four-day labs.

We knew we were getting into one of the most challenging spaces – getting 27 diverse, opinionated, experienced professionals to co-own, co-share, co-think, and co-work towards feminist youth leadership building. We were fortunate that the whole cohort chose to come back with an open, if tentative, spirit, wanting to arrive at a sense of a collective, even if unsure how to get there.

Over the course of the first two days, the Gender at Work India facilitation team ran through several intentional iterative exercises of trust building, identifying and addressing conflicts, and opening up space for people to be vulnerable with one another as a way to move from a conceptual understanding to an embodied engagement.

The cohort was presented with several exercises to create room for both individual and collective reflections. They engaged the cohort in reflecting on their privileges and powers, deliberating on the generational gap in activism, and non-consensus within feminist spaces on issues of caste, transness, disabilities, and religions. Discussions with external facilitators opened up more space for the cohort to deliberate together on reasons that prevented them from owning the process. We, however, continued to struggle till the third day of the Culmination Lab, as the cohort still had not come together as a collective unit.



The third day of the lab marked a pivotal point when the lead co-facilitators exited the facilitation process by presenting the cohort with a collective exercise. This exercise pushed the cohort to step up and claim the space which was theirs and initiated a collective dialogue for resolutions, closures, and a vision for themselves. When the exercises were complete, the cohort came back together as a unit, willing to engage, dialogue, and recognise themselves not just as 27 individuals but as one cohort. This reaffirmed the idea of the collective voice and that working and doing is not a linear process. It took almost three months for the cohort to recognise itself as a unified group. It is significant to share that on the one hand we trusted the cohort to come together against all odds, but on the other we had also accepted otherwise if the situation was contrary.

On the last day, the cohort again took to planning – this time foregrounding the need for mutual accountability in being able to undertake collective action. Individual co-creators shared their visions of how this process should go on, how centrally they would like to be involved with moving this ideation forward, and how they would take this ownership while making room for people's individual limitations.

And so, the process and learning went on with the holding of the space taken up primarily by the co-creators. In the days and years to come this undertaking will shed light on what it takes for diverse individuals to come together and co-create, but we have already learnt some crucial things about holding space for co-creation.

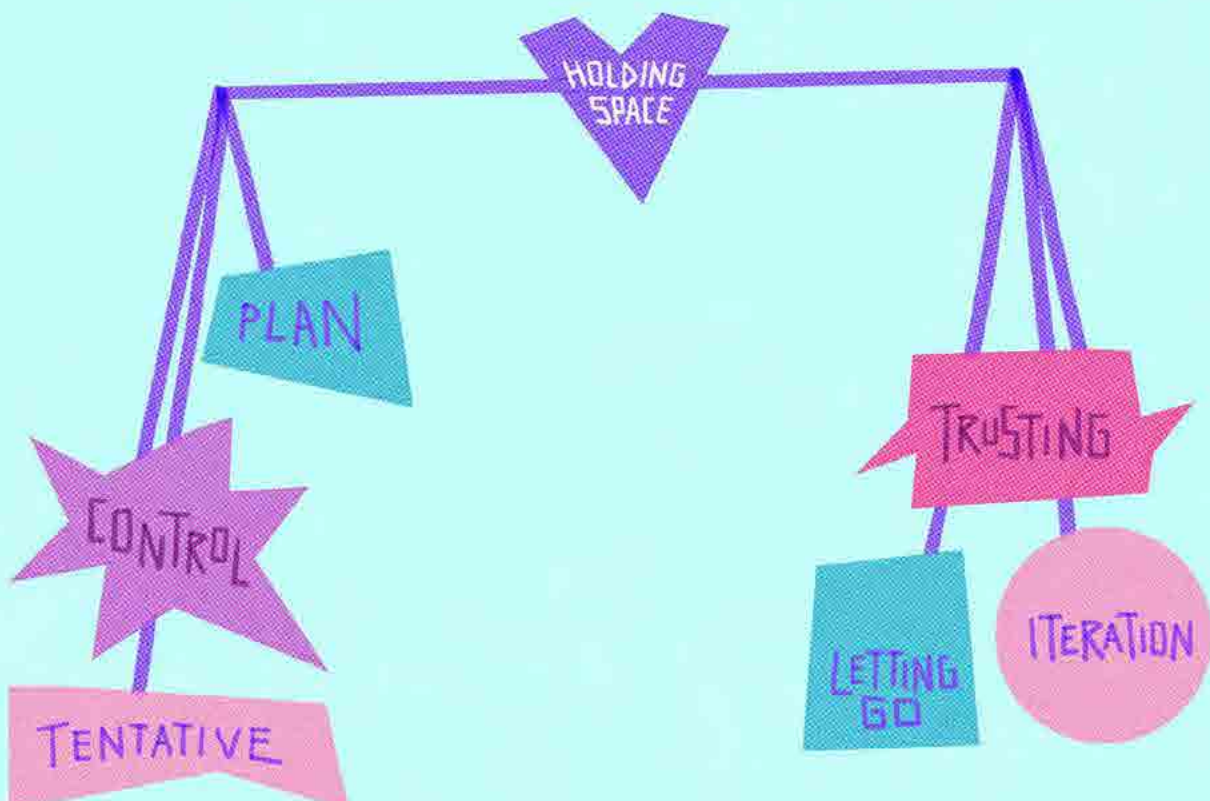


Some learnings about holding space

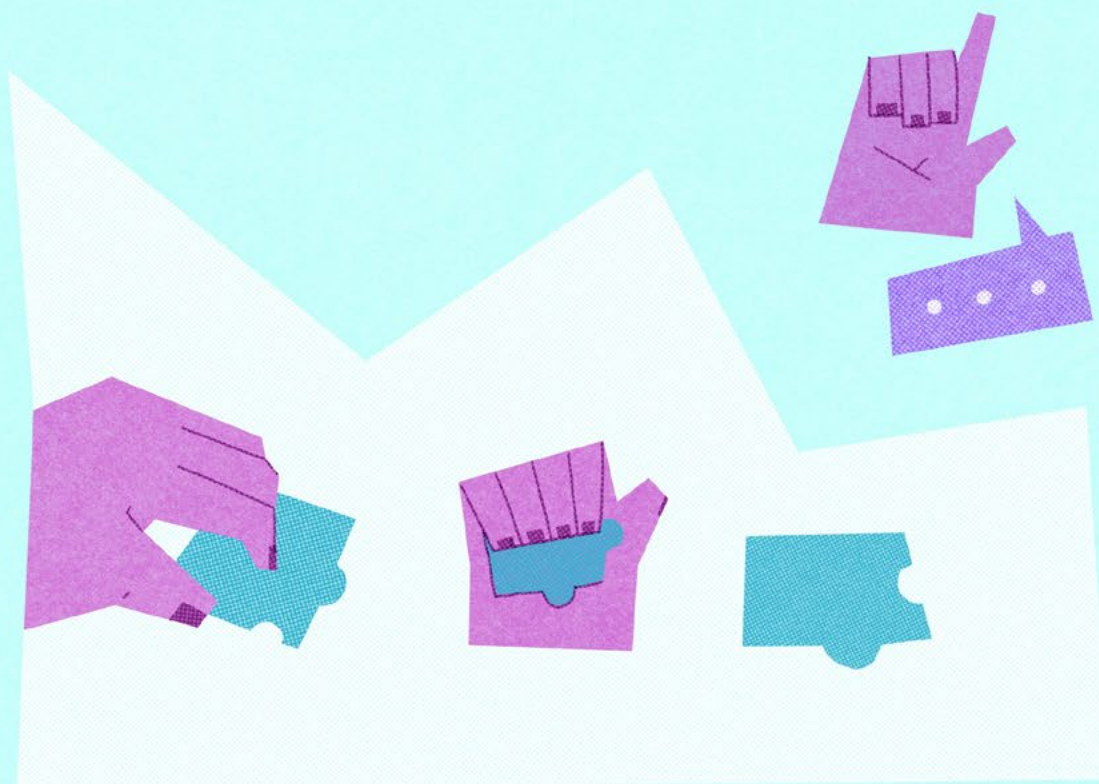


The role of conscientisation isn't always located in an explicit knowledge transfer – The movement of thoughts from the unconscious to the conscious is built in shifting the cerebral to embodiment. In India's context, it is also about de-brahminising learning and praxis, of moving beyond a framework that sees only that which is cerebral as worthy of being knowledge.

As designers, it is important to remain tentative and trusting - Throughout the process, we committed ourselves to walking on a thin line between control and letting go, tentative but open to decision-making, structure and spontaneity, linear and crip time, and plan and iteration. We offered trust from the onset and the democratisation of consent seeking and accountability measures. Accepting individual and collective agency is crucial to make room for failures and mistakes. Allowing judgements, biases, and fears to surface and allowing them in the process is crucial for building transformative feminist youth leadership.

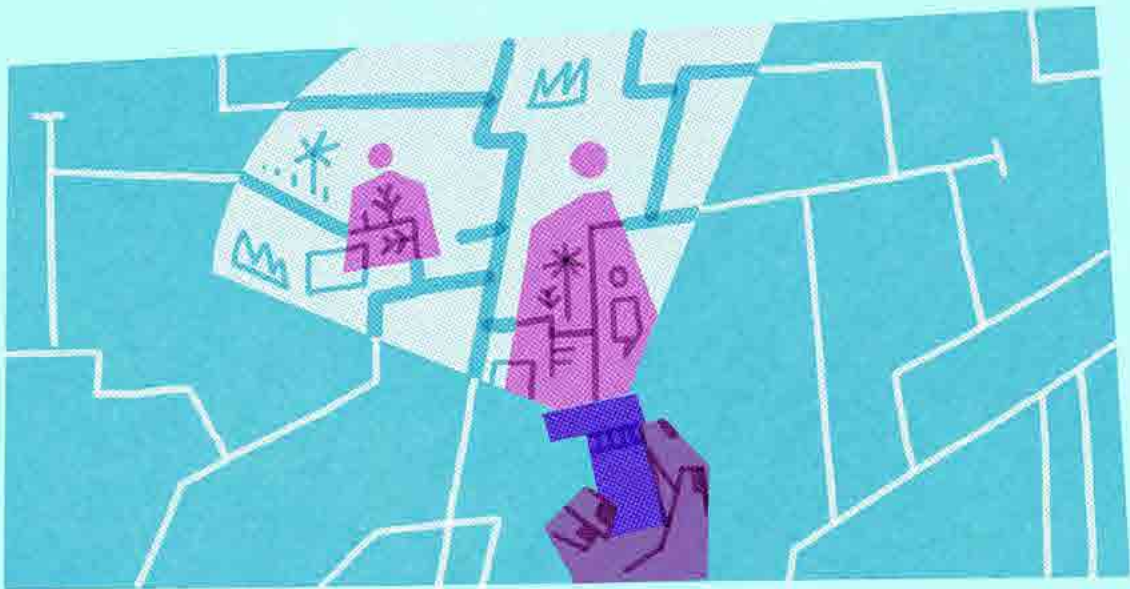


Agency and openness - Holding spaces that are declared 'open', with people having agency to shape them as they must is inherently an iterative process. However, it becomes imperative for the people holding the space to ask: How can this be truly open? Have we come to a common understanding of agency and openness? Is everyone able to engage with these concepts and action them? Is there something additional that we can do to facilitate people's ability to access the open space that is offered?

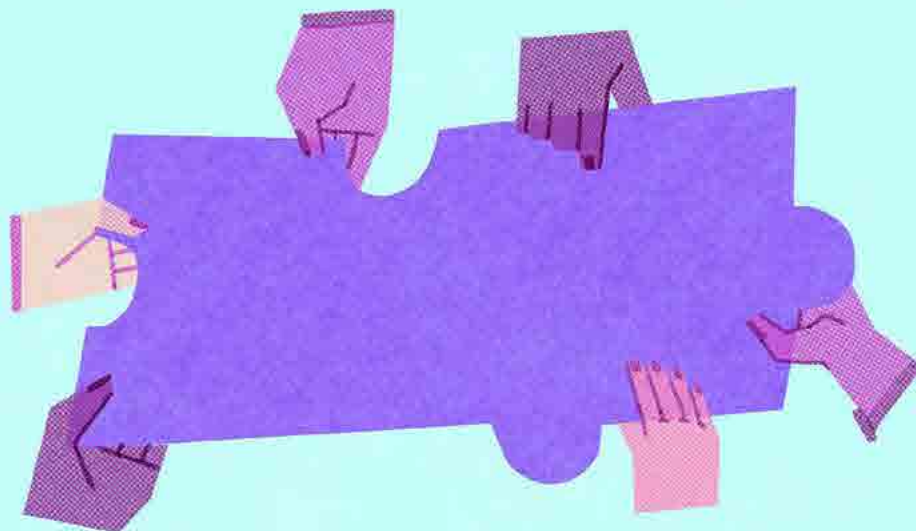


In these questions also lies the essential practice of decolonising tools. On reflection, open space was a tool designed for societies in which taking up space was a natural act that was premised simply on the provision of such a space. This does not hold true in the same way for cultures in the Global South, where many systemic deprivations make us unsure and untrusting of such offerings. There are also deeply internalised segregations in who feels okay with taking up space from different caste/class locations. What could we have done to make this a more accessible tool? Could we have made it possible to move from such a cerebral structure to one that was more embodied? Could we have set aside additional time for the co-creators to conceptualise offerings and design sessions? Would that have moved the template away from just discursive spaces to include alternative pedagogies?

The practice of intersectionality is inherently uncomfortable - Simply engaging with the ideas of intersectionality is not enough. The doing of it means staying with the discomfort of actually bringing people together from different spaces and learning to see how we make sense together through the intermingling/layering of ideas and identities. This is tough work for everyone because it necessitates that we look beyond ourselves as individuals and see each other as actors within systems meant to privilege, oppress, and divide.



Mutual accountability - An essential aspect of group spaces, especially those premised on collective action, is how every individual is able to be accountable to the process and to the other co-creators. This also manifests in the idea of freedom versus responsibility. If you are seeking individual freedom, are you also taking accountability for its effect on the collective? How does a space hold its participants accountable to the larger goal and embed that accountability into practice?

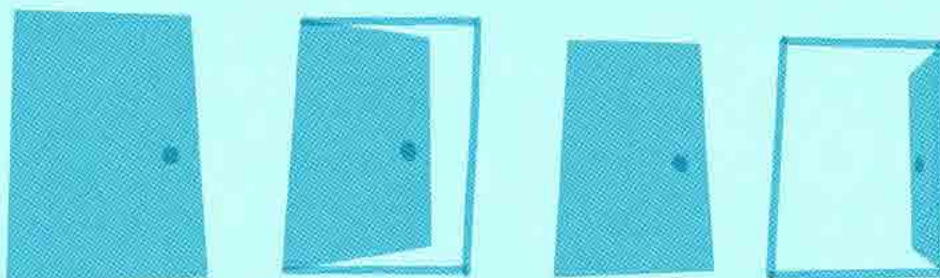


Accessibility - Accessibility manifests itself in many ways, but essentially asks the questions: Is everyone able to participate in the same ways? Or are barriers to entry different for different people? How does your space make accommodations for this?

If you start with the questions - What is a space? Who is it for? Who creates it? it becomes quickly apparent that most spaces are built from normative experiences and fundamentally make themselves inaccessible to queer, disabled, and marginalised bodies. Crip time and space, therefore, become essential ways of 'bending' time and space to include more bodies.



Political performativity – We are able to hold space for ourselves and others when we accept and convey that everyone doesn't need to be in every space, that we don't always need to say the right things. Even though systemic deprivation manifests itself in wanting to be seen and heard in every space, how can we hold spaces where people can draw in and draw out while still feeling belongingness to the collective space?



Hence, opening spaces of co-creation is a constant process held together by honest reflection: Who is doing the work of opening? Who is it open to? In what ways is it open?

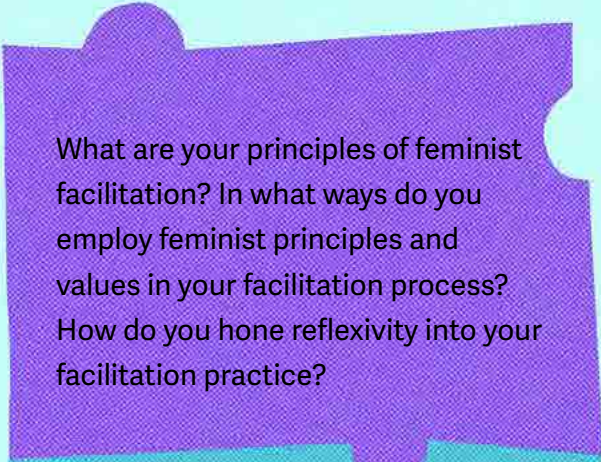
Feminist Facilitator

Facilitation is an important part of our work. We believe that feminist facilitators are different from any other. In this process intervention, we worked with facilitators who brought deep sensitivity, life skills, and interpersonal skills that allowed the cohort to acknowledge its own privileges, powers, and accountability towards collective action.

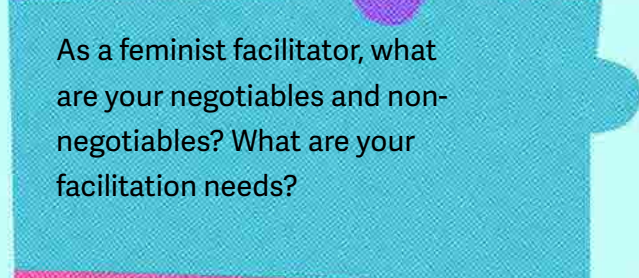
Feminist facilitation constitutes an enormous responsibility of holding a space for a diverse group of people. Feminist facilitators are key to the construction of spaces that value the varied lived experiences of the participants and their expertise, time, and energy while helping them reflect on their gendered privileges and powers, exploring tools to challenge hierarchies, resolving conflicts, and fostering collective action. We recognise that even as practitioners, feminists, and activists we are an outcome of our individual and collective socialisation. We have all internalised casteist, racist, transphobic, and queer phobic ableism which needs active efforts by challenging ourselves and their manifestation in any collective we are a part of.

It is essential that feminist facilitators recognise that they need to also engage in a process of continuous learning. Like the growth we see in the participants who go through a leadership development process, feminist facilitators should embark on their own journeys of discovery and growth.

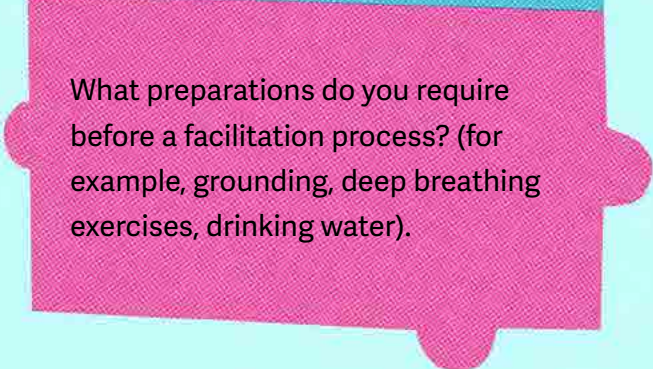
Here are some guiding questions we have sat with as facilitators to be able to intentionally hold space:



What are your principles of feminist facilitation? In what ways do you employ feminist principles and values in your facilitation process? How do you hone reflexivity into your facilitation practice?



As a feminist facilitator, what are your negotiables and non-negotiables? What are your facilitation needs?



What preparations do you require before a facilitation process? (for example, grounding, deep breathing exercises, drinking water).

Some principles of feminist facilitation



Learning about the self and our personal needs: All feminist facilitators need to have a heightened awareness of themselves, their personal needs as well as their limitations - physical, mental, and emotional. The facilitation journey is also a process of continuous learning and we need to find spaces that help us observe, reflect, critique, celebrate, and enhance our facilitation practices.



Be prepared for the emotional labour of holding feminist spaces: We often tend to downplay the emotional labour required to undertake process-based interventions, especially if these relate to feminist facilitation. A feminist facilitator is not only focused on guiding substantive discussions but also needs to be attuned to the emotional barometer of the collective. Strong emotional responses are elicited when people commit themselves to the process. Emotions can range from feeling content, happy or even ecstatic but also feeling anxious, bitter, sad, angry, and envious as people start locating themselves in relation to others in the group and within the larger movement. Just like any other feminist work, the process of facilitation will, therefore, constitute significant emotional labour for the facilitator. Coming to grips with the intensity and magnitude of this emotional labour requires prior mental preparation. One way of handling this is to ensure facilitation in pairs or having a set of facilitators for the entire intervention period.



Learn to work with discomfort:

Participants often feel discomfort as a result of critical awareness, especially as they grapple with views that are markedly different from their own or when they are confronted with their own privileges and complicity in reproducing inequalities. For many of them, these reflexive processes challenge their ways of seeing and being in the world and gives rise to inter-group conflicts. The discomfort created through the process intervention is crucial and absolutely necessary for individual and collective transformation. The feminist facilitator has to embrace this discomfort as an indication of the establishment (or seeding) of a dialogic space that if steered properly will eventually lead to collective ownership of issues and priorities and the formation of a community with a shared sense of purpose.



Practising self-care and setting healthy boundaries:

Often, as facilitators, we feel compelled to be there for everyone in the group at all times, especially to demonstrate solidarity. However, we have to remind ourselves that this will lead to exhaustion and burn-out and eventually be detrimental to the process. If we feel drained of energy and worn out, it will be impossible to turn up and hold the space for others. An important part of this process work is to make oneself vulnerable. Recognise what part of you and what information you want to share with the group and whether this revelation is necessary for the process. This is another aspect of setting boundaries.

While the feminist facilitators have to constantly engage with the emotions of those in the room, their individual journeys can often be lonely. The feminist facilitators should find processes and spaces that allow them to heal as well. This should include processing how the intervention has impacted them. For undertaking this self-work, the feminist facilitator will have to work with another process partner or coach or friend or even a therapist.



Exercising an inclusive and non-judgmental approach: As a feminist facilitator, one has to respect the diversity of personal experiences of the cohort and their inherent desire to challenge traditional views. Inevitably this requires the facilitator to have an inclusive and non-judgmental approach that also involves being mindful of one's own implicit biases. This further means that the feminist facilitator strives towards creating an equitable space for everyone in the group.

Recognising and addressing resistance: Participants will sometimes vocalise their disapproval of or resistance to the process (I don't see the point of this. I don't know why I want to be here. I don't know where this is going!). At other times this will be tacit and expressed in passive forms of resistance (not engaging fully in the sessions, being disruptive, provocations). It is important to note these pockets of resistance and validate the emotions and feeling of the. And yet it is equally critical to not get caught in an emotional entrapment and respond from a position of defensiveness. The facilitator has to pivot from this and move the group forward.



Facilitation design must deliberately integrate the heart, mind, and body:

Feminist process work must recognise the multi-dimensionality of human experiences. Our history, culture, and context shape the way that our bodies, our minds, and our hearts respond to different processes. To be able to completely engage with the existential core of the participants, all three elements of a person – heart, body, and mind - need to be engaged with and integrated into the design of the process intervention. Body-mind centring and grounding practices through yoga, tai chi, somatic practices or even those rooted in our communities like art and dancing, help us dig into our inner self and overcome a mechanical, purely biological, objective understanding of the body and its functioning.



Letting go of control: One of the fundamental tenets of feminist facilitation is the belief that the group has the agency and the power to move towards and achieve a common goal. The attainment of the goal may happen during a workshop but it is also possible that it will only materialise after the workshop or even after a series of workshops. This calls on the facilitator to let go of control and be guided by the group's perspective, rather than asserting her own. Internalised patriarchy drives our need for control and we may not even realise this. In fact, by giving up trying to convert, solve for, or fix the group, the facilitator might unleash the group's latent or 'power within' and 'power with' to arrive at a common purpose and work towards it. This will mean that the facilitator takes a backseat in the process and allows the group to drive itself.



Setting group norms: Before asking the participants to share anything personal about themselves, one needs to establish what is acceptable and what is not acceptable for the group. Developing group norms helps establish safety for the participants, especially when dealing with people whose voices are often marginalised, who have faced historical oppression, and who have experienced trauma and violence in their lives. We have reiterated the importance of body work, but before we start any process, it might be advisable to affirm, preferably anonymously, each individual's comfort level in the group with physical contact and touch. It is especially important to recognise individual concerns regarding trauma. Neuro-divergent individuals may get triggered by sensory overloads. It is important to restate that they, and others in the group, have the power to walk away from any process at any point of time.

How can we build processes to strengthen feminist youth leadership towards collective action?

B3

Sustaining the Work

As this process continues to grow and build, we are cognisant of the larger forces of resistance it operates in. Hence, sustaining this process is not just a need but a collective political exercise. To find ways for feminist youth activists to continue to find collective meaning, resources, solidarity, and support, sustainability has to be thought through in intentional ways from the very inception of the process.



You can begin by asking
In your context...



What are some of the sustainability models that inform your processes?



What does a successful leadership building process look like to you?



What are some non-linear, alternative models of measuring your project's impact?



What are some evolving factors that may influence the sustainability of your project?



What threatens this achievement of shifts or changes in the short, intermediate, and long terms? Have you created a risk mitigation strategy and sustainability model for your project?



How do you intend to mobilise and share resources for developing a sustainability model for your project?

Sustaining Through Iterative Processes

As a thread that runs through our work and this workbook, process-orientedness has often held the key to sustainability. It requires a thorough understanding of the idea that processes are in constant motion, and that as individuals and organisations we must constantly adapt to what the process requires of us, rather than bending it to our ways.



This process was led by the questions we asked ourselves at the very beginning:

What is feminist youth leadership in the Indian context?

And how can we as Gender at Work India contribute to building and strengthening it?

We had several hypotheses of what it would take to do this, including designing a curriculum, piloting it with a young cohort, and publishing our findings. However, our very first process challenged this linear approach and we kept revisiting both its substance and form as we went along. We added an artists' workshop when we saw a dearth of forms in which the development sector held learning. We also added a second lab and breathing room in between as we grew to realise that singular workshops reiterate many of the fast-paced ideas of change that we were challenging.

Being process-oriented is also an acknowledgement of the fact that change takes time and is non-linear. The second Leadership Lab in November was designed around the idea of revisiting, revising, and rebuilding. Of seeing processes that have happened so far as building blocks of a much larger change to come, rather than seeing them as capsule events in themselves. It also reiterated that to be process-led is to consistently do the work trusting that a larger change will come

about through tenacity, authenticity, and rigour. Training, workshops, and gatherings cannot just be capsule processes in and of themselves as it is a folly to expect snap solutions to problems that have been centuries in the making. Process-orientation builds the long-term muscle to be able to sit with difficulties, communicate through conflicts, and build movements that stand the test of time.

Two questions that constantly came up in our reflection were: What is our positionality as an organisation that works with institution building and strengthening the feminist movement at large and in this process in particular? What is it that we uniquely bring, and how can we more meaningfully contribute to the feminist movement? In many ways this workbook is a capsule of what we feel we can contribute: an honest, detailed look at what it takes to be process-led, and the difficult questions we can ask ourselves as designers, facilitators, and organisations working on feminist youth leadership.

Sustaining Through Building Collaborations and Communities of Respect

Given that a big chunk of what we resist as a part of movements is the deep alienation of increasingly individualised societies, it becomes imperative that **our own politics be grounded in collective values**. Building communities, therefore, is a principle as much as it is an undertaking.

Our journey thus far has been a testament to how this is often the most painful and most rewarding part of any process. For people with similar and dissimilar views to come together, to extend and seek resources and care, and to move forward with a spirit of collaboration takes a great deal of mutual trust and respect. Communities also prioritise the pace of the collective over the individual, pushing individual and collective resistance and rigidities towards change with gentleness.

In an increasingly virtual world and post-COVID reality, we felt that the values of building communities must be embedded in every process, rather than simply being seen as a tool in physical spaces. While the Feminist Labs themselves were spaces of fostering collaborations and communities, all the other groups of people that got involved – respondents to the needs assessment, participants in the virtual consultation, practitioners from the artists' workshop, interviewees for the curriculum development processes, interviewers, illustrators, etc – were all seen as essential collaborators to what

emerged in the course of the process. We socialised many an idea in these groups, and were also held accountable to our stated intent consistently. In many cases, these collaborations also transformed into communities of respect that now thrive and proliferate in their own organic ways.

It is, therefore, communities and principles that far outstrip the ambition of a singular intervention, and must be treated as an essential lens from which to see sustainability.



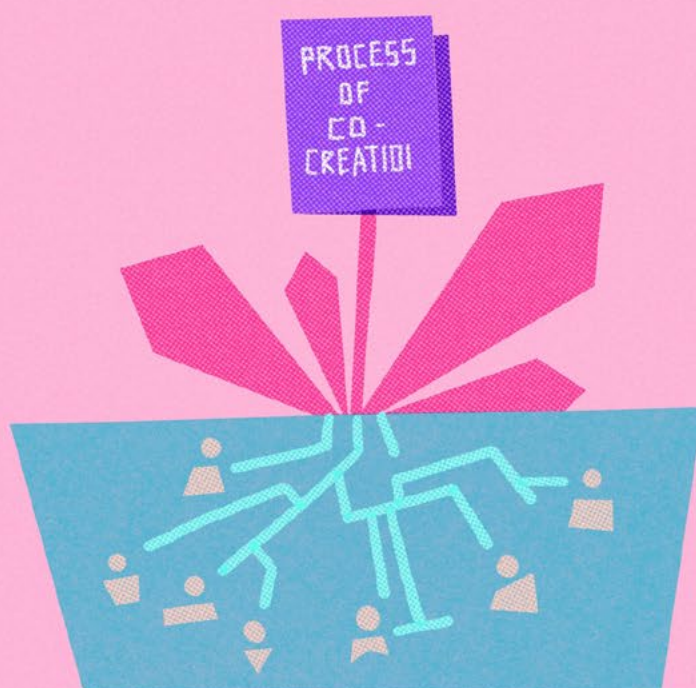
Sustaining Through an Open Source Mindset

Collectives, at their heart, are built around the idea of equitably shared and distributed labour – emotional and otherwise. They sustain through a free, trusting exchange of ideas, knowledge, and praxis.

From its conception, we see our work as a contribution to the larger movement. Not as something we own, but something that we have co-created, borrowing from the knowledge that has been so generously shared across the history of movements. This rejection of a singular ownership of knowledge and ideas is a direct confrontation of capitalist ideas of ‘profiting’ off intellectual labour.

Just as organisations that don’t see knowledge and power as fluid fail to hone a second and third line of leadership to sustain them beyond the cult of a singular leader, it is important to keep examining what our roles are in the process of diffusing knowledge, and what the concentration of knowledge does to collectives.

Our work and this workbook are examples of this. Coming together because an incredible array of people with rich, textured experiences came on board to think, ideate, and create with us, the ideas that resulted belong to us all. This workbook bears witness to this process and is written to reflect the vulnerability and openness of the process and written with the trust that both failings and successes are held collectively by whoever reads it and uses it.



Sustaining Through Collective Advocacy and Youth Activism

As we wrap up the processes thus far and look ahead, one of the ways of sustaining this process is for the co-creators to pursue collective advocacy efforts that further the agendas that have been identified by them. Such collective advocacy could be used for addressing the complex and systemic power structures that the feminist movement in India (and elsewhere) has been trying to upturn over the years. The collective advocacy approach can be applied to influence issues at a local (at a village, municipality or province level), national, regional, or global level.

We know and trust that the co-creators can identify opportunities (for example, around key intergovernmental processes such as the CSW, the G20 processes such as Y20, and the UN Climate Change processes), around specific policy or issue areas (for example, violence against women and trans-rights) or specific initiatives (such as the Generation Equality Forum).

Unless we take some of these learnings and inject them into the intergovernmental processes that influence the superstructure that we are all embedded in, the impact threatens to stay completely local and, as a result, it does not question the global structure of power and the politics of fund flows.

Our work is situated at the fringes within the Diversity and Inclusion (D&I), feminist, institutional building landscape in India. Through designing and executing this mammoth feminist fringe work, we were able to tap into and build interlinkages through several micro, meso, and macro processes with a hope to shift rigid, mainstream heteronormative, heteropatriarchal, and brahmanical conceptualisations and modes of thinking and working. We invite readers to explore, tweak, and adapt our approach that can be fed into regional, local, national, and international models of governance, lobbying, advocacy, and solidarity practices.



Emerging questions around sustaining this work

As we collectively attempt to build on the gains made through this process, there are some questions we continue to sit with:

How does co-ownership of processes expand to include monetary resources as they start to come in? How does decision-making and mutual accountability around shared resources get actioned?

How do we take intense processes that require a high level of conscientisation and facilitation skills and transfer them to other spaces, in other contexts and languages, without losing the essence of the undertaking?


With resources for movement-building shrinking significantly, how can we think more creatively about pooling and maximising the existing ones? In what ways do we build effective tools to influence donors and funding agencies to contribute more to this work?


In an increasingly fraught political environment, how do we consciously carve out spaces of care, leisure, and humour collectively? How can these expand to include our friends located in conflict zones?


What does co-building and co-authorship look like within collectives? How can we acknowledge different kinds of labour?


This is an ongoing work of Gender at Work India. If you are interested in learning more about our work or designing a similar process for your group, collective or organisation, please contact us through our socials.




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