

The Network of Women in Media, India (NWMI) is a 20-year-old collective that serves as a forum for women in media professions to share information and resources, exchange ideas, promote media awareness and ethics, and work for gender equality and justice within the media and society. It has gradually emerged as a space known to provide solidarity and support to women journalists, including freelancers/independent journalists, whose work is often solitary and whose concerns are rarely addressed by other media organisations.

The NWMI is an inclusive community that welcomes as members women (and those who identify as women or gender fluid) working in or on the media (media professionals/practitioners, media scholars/researchers, media faculty/students). There are no selection criteria or processes; any woman who belongs to one or more of the above categories and wishes to join the network is added to the email list, the primary platform for interaction at the national level, and can choose to join other network groups, particularly on social media.

The network recognises and celebrates the achievements of fellow members, while also offering solidarity and support to colleagues facing various obstacles and injustices in the course of work. A major area of focus has been the precarious situation of independent/freelance journalists; details of initiatives in this area are available [here](#). The network has also launched several other initiatives, such as the [NWMI Fellowship](#), the [Letdown in Lockdown series](#) (in response to the widespread loss of jobs and incomes in the wake of the Covid pandemic), the "[In Memoriam](#)" listing to record and mourn the Covid related deaths of journalists and media workers, the [Journalists for Afghanistan fundraiser](#), and the [Gender, Media and Elections blog](#), in addition to a number of [surveys and publications](#). The NWMI is a 100% not-for-profit organisation – a voluntary, informal, decentralised, non-hierarchical collective with no institutional affiliation, secretariat, office-bearers or paid staff. It is entirely dependent on members' contributions of time, energy and money. Decision-making is as transparent and consensus-based as possible, invariably following extensive deliberation.

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

It is almost impossible to generalise about India since it is such an enormous country and diverse in every possible way, not only in terms of language, race, religion, caste, class and other such markers but also in terms of other social, cultural, economic and political factors. The status of women also varies according to class, community, location (urban-rural, socially progressive-backward states, etc.), and so on. However, there is little doubt that it remains a predominantly a patriarchal society, where women face cultural and social barriers in their pursuit of professional careers, starting with lack of encouragement for higher education, pressures to marry and

bear children, notions about "acceptable" careers for women, as well as typecasting and the proverbial glass ceiling at work.

*What does practising collective feminist leadership mean within your context?*

The decision that the NWMI would be a voluntary, informal, decentralised, non-hierarchical collective was made at the end of a long, animated discussion during the first national meeting of Indian women in media in 2002. The pros and cons of being structured like traditional organisations, with office-bearers, etc., and unstructured, attempting to function as an informal collective owned and guided by members on the basis of consensus, were thoroughly examined. In the end the consensus in 2002 was that if the experiment with collective functioning failed there was always the option of adopting a more formal structure and system. Over the past two decades we have been continually striving to ensure collective ownership and decision-making. Yet, although there are no designated leaders, we have found that those who initiate action and follow through on tasks – and also happen to be older and more experienced – are often assumed to be leaders. It is perhaps worth noting that, in recent times especially,

the advantages of remaining informal and unfunded have become more evident: the network has been able to remain independent and relatively less vulnerable to harassment for taking public stands on a number of issues that may not be appreciated by the establishment. Practising collective leadership in a growing, mainly virtual, network is admittedly challenging, given the diversity of views and positions among members. Executing programmes – such as annual meetings, local events or slightly longer-term research projects as well as more sustained initiatives – has meant translating collective ownership of a vision into practice.

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longer-term research projects as well as more sustained initiatives – has meant translating collective ownership of a vision into practice. The attempt has been to apply democratic principles and a commitment to diversity and inclusion at every stage, from identifying members willing to participate in network activities to providing guidance to newer members who take on the task of co-ordinating activities.

Feminist mentoring, which has by necessity remained largely online, involves both challenges and rewards, but the process has helped move the network towards decentralised, consensus-based functioning. Mentoring also happens at the collective level in the form of responses to dilemmas and difficulties of various kinds highlighted

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

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

The NWMI has been an amorphous organisation from day one. Of course, the fact is that someone needed to take the initiative to kickstart the process of figuring out if, how, why and in what form an association of Indian women in media could emerge. That person naturally reached out to friends and colleagues within the media to join and contribute to the effort. Among them were several who had earlier worked together as part of an informal group of media women in Mumbai. The fact that some of them also had a background of involvement in feminist and/or other rights-based groups and movements contributed towards the network's vision of gender equality and equity and the identification of goals to be pursued, including democratic functioning and power-sharing. About a decade after the network was launched, a systematic review of internal functioning was undertaken to discuss how processes could be streamlined, and decision-making made more collective, while not compromising on speed that was of the essence in some cases – for example, while issuing statements on current topics. While recognising that members had varying levels of involvement on a regular basis, due to parallel professional and domestic commitments, the attempt was to ensure that decision-making was not dominated by only a few.



The setting up of a 'Working Council' was an attempt to enhance representation and involvement of the various local chapters (through their coordinators) as well as individuals who had journeyed with NWMI since its inception. The Working Council remains a work in progress, even as the network has grown in leaps and bounds over the past few years, especially after the advent of social media, with instant messaging making communication much quicker and easier, both nationally and locally. Aware that a non-funded network can automatically exclude the involvement of those without resources, we have also made a conscious effort to challenge the domination of city based, English-speaking, upper caste and therefore relatively privileged journalists, through some practical initiatives. Among these are travel grants to enable members with limited resources to attend national meetings, and the fellowship (funded through member contributions) to advance professional growth among media women functioning in difficult circumstances. Participants in national meetings are encouraged

to speak in languages they are comfortable in, with other members voluntarily providing translations to enable everyone to understand them. As a result, the network has been slowly evolving into a more inclusive space, with a steadily growing number of members from traditionally disadvantaged communities, living in far-flung places (including rural areas and conflict affected parts of the country), and working in multiple languages. Much more remains to be done, of course, to ensure more diversity.

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

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

The following issues of concern were identified:

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

### **'From Me to We' – The NWMI Story**

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

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

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

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

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

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

The issuance of such statements is among the most frequent activities of the network and we try our best to make the process as participatory and consensus-based as

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possible within obvious time constraints. Any member is welcome to propose a statement in the listserv or social media groups and to offer to draft it. Even though the task of drafting often ends up being shouldered by a few members with a special interest in such issues, we always make an effort to ask for volunteers and sometimes succeed in recruiting a few more members into the pool of available drafters. An example could be the way we organise our regular (more or less annual) three-day national meetings. From the beginning they have been held in different parts of the country – as part of the effort to decentralise, involve more members in organisational activities, enable members from across the country to get to know each other and also discover more about a different place, the concerns of people there, the intellectual, cultural and other resources available locally, etc.

Local groups are encouraged to volunteer to host these meetings, with the decision on the next venue usually taken at the previous meeting. Oftentimes local groups are relatively new and small; many members have not had the experience of attending any NWMI national meetings (which, it is widely agreed, are quite unique among gatherings of media professionals). So, they often require assistance and hand-holding through the process of putting together a meeting. A few network veterans are usually available for consultation, sharing of possibly useful past experiences and suggestions/contacts when required. But ultimately the local team decides the programme and goes about raising funds (to cover the expenses of the event only), contacting resource persons, booking venues and doing everything else related to organising the meeting. These fairly large, long and complex events are challenging but pulling them off successfully can be a very empowering experience. Every single NWMI national meeting has been unique, stimulating and enjoyable. Organising these meetings also generally leads to the strengthening of the local group and bonding of members who may not have known each other well earlier, despite being based in the same place. Of course, sometimes there is friction and unfortunate fallouts as well (e.g., one or more members dropping out of the organising team and, less frequently, even leaving the network).

***THE SELF: please describe the place and role given to self-care, inner transformation, collective care and radical healing in your collective? Please give one or two concrete examples of how individual members are supported in these aspects by the collective?***

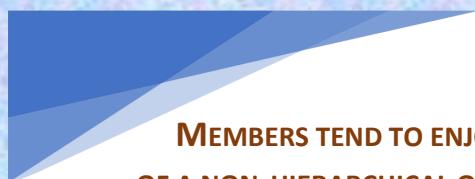
This is not something we have much experience with since we are not a tangible organisation with members working together on a day-to-day basis. However, whenever instances of professional or sexual harassment, job loss, delayed (or denied) payments for work done, etc, are shared or come to the notice of members, there is usually an outpouring of sympathy, moral support and offers of more direct help. Many of our statements emerge from such instances. Several



members (and even non-members whose experiences have prompted statements) have acknowledged the value of such support during difficult periods in their lives.

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

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



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

within the media and society) still falls disproportionately on the shoulders of a few committed members. This sometimes means that those who are most closely involved with getting things done are perceived to be Leaders when they are actually Workers! And this misperception occasionally leads to uninformed, and therefore unfortunate and somewhat unfair, allegations about some members being more equal than others, etc. This is certainly a challenge and a conundrum that we have not yet found a solution for.

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

Power is a tricky business, since it comes with responsibilities. Successful communication of this reality by walking the talk is key to sharing power.

Consistent mentoring through the sharing of information, goals and vision, as well as organisational history (both informal/anecdotal and formal/documentated) is an important element of building collective leadership.

Diversity and inclusiveness do not happen by themselves. Concerted, consistent efforts need to be made to question existing hierarchies of gender, class, caste, religion, language and location, both within the organisation and outside, and to systematically address injustice based on identity and other social markers.

Feminist leadership means leaving oneself open to criticism and learning, without which collectivisation is incomplete. It is not easy but it is necessary.

It also means being open to learning from others, including newer, younger, members of the organisation, who often contribute fresh, useful information and ideas.

When involvement in organisational work brings joy and a sense of belonging, there are greater chances of volunteers sticking around.

Personal relationships, warmth, empathy, mutual concern, care and trust go a long way towards building a collective community.

A good sense of humour is an essential ingredient of feminist leadership.