FROM ME TO WE - Feminist Leadership Mapping Initiative

1. **Could you introduce your group/organization/movement/community/other space, - if you are comfortable, share any useful information about when it was formed, how it came together, what it does, etc.**

The Network of Women in Media, India (NWMI) is a nearly 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 listserv, the primary platform for interaction at the national level, and can choose to join other network groups, particularly on social media.

Our current membership comprises over 570 media women based in almost all Indian states (and some overseas locations), of varying ages and years of experience, working in print, digital and broadcast media in multiple languages. Members are connected virtually through an email listserv as well as via social media groups, but also meet in person during periodic national meetings in various venues across the country. Local networks in several cities also organise occasional events and get-togethers of their own.

The NWMI takes strong, prompt public positions on journalists' rights and media freedom/standards/ethics, while standing alongside media women in struggles for gender equality, safety and justice, at both individual and community levels.

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 fund-raiser, 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.

2. **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.

Although India is home to the third highest number of billionaires in the world, according to a Forbes report in 2021, and is counted among the world's fastest growing economies, it is also one of the most unequal countries. The top 10% of the Indian population holds 77% of the total national wealth, according to Oxfam. Nearly three quarters (73%) of the wealth generated in 2017 went to the richest 1%, while 67 million Indians, who comprise the poorest half of the population, saw only a 1% increase in their wealth. According to the All India Debt & Investment Survey, 2019, conducted by the official National Sample Survey, the richest 10% of Indians own over half of the country's physical and financial assets (55.7% of the total assets in urban areas and 50.8% in rural areas), while the bottom 50% own less than 10%.

India ranks 131 out of 189 countries on the 2020 Human Development Index (dropping from 129 in 2019). With a total HDI value of 0.645, it was placed in the 'medium human development' group in the latest of the UNDP's Human Development Reports (HDR). An estimated 27.9% of the population is multidimensionally poor, while an additional 19.3% is classified as vulnerable to multidimensional poverty.

India was placed at the 123th position out of 162 countries in the Gender Inequality Index and was therefore slotted in Group 5, along with other countries with low equality in HDI achievements between women and men. Only 13.5% of parliamentary seats are held by women. Female participation in the labour market is 20.5% (compared to 76.1% for men); going by recent data from the Ministry of Statistics it has fallen further thanks to the Covid-19 pandemic. The Maternal Mortality Rate has improved but is still grim, with 133 women dying from pregnancy-related causes for every 100,000 live births. The 2020 HDR also noted the persistent higher malnutrition among girls due to continuing differences in parents' attitudes towards daughters and sons.

The Global Gender Gap Report 2021 of the World Economic Forum ranked India 140 out of 156 countries in terms of the Gender Gap Index.

According to the UNFPA's State of World Population 2020, India accounts for 45.8 million of the world's 142.6 million "missing females" over the past 50 years. "Missing females" are women missing from the population at given dates, presumably due to the cumulative effect of prenatal and postnatal sex selection in the past.

According to the Census of India 2021, female literacy, at 65.46%, still lags behind the male literacy rate of 82.14%. The HDR 2020 reported that just 27.7% of adult women have reached at least a secondary level of education (compared to 47.0% of their male counterparts).

Yet World Bank data show that, at least until 2016, more Indian women graduated in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) than women in countries like the US, UK, Germany and France, among others. While the female share of STEM graduates in India was 42.72% in 2016, it was 43.93% in 2017 and 42.73% in 2018. There is still a female to male gap, but it is steadily narrowing.

Women are also catching up in terms of the national average for Gross Enrollment Rate in Higher Education. In 2018-19, the female GER in higher education exceeded the male GER for the first time, if only by a tiny margin. GER among females has been showing a continuous positive trend up by 3.2 since 2014-15, whereas the male GER increased only by 1.

Of course, these encouraging trends in education do not necessarily translate into higher levels of work participation due to various gender-related reasons. For example, there is significant attrition even among those who do enter the job market, often because of family pressures and/or responsibilities.

Paradoxes like those presented by the educational data above are typical of almost all information about India, which is why it is difficult to generalise about the sub-continental nation.

Similar anomalies come up in the context of women in the media in India as well. On the one hand, there are numerous well-known, widely admired, award-winning female journalists in many parts of the country, especially in urban centres. Women often constitute at least half of the student body in institutions of media education and many go on to enter the profession. On the other hand, systematic studies as well as anecdotal evidence and conversations among media women indicate that the high achievers do not necessarily represent the norm and that there is a high attrition rate among women media professionals.

The 2011 Global Report on the Status of Women in the News Media, brought out by the International Women's Media Foundation (IWMF) in collaboration with UNESCO, which covered over 500 media companies in nearly 60 countries, including India, revealed that, despite the growing and visible presence of many successful, high profile and highly regarded media women, both internationally and in India, the overall situation is far from

encouraging in most parts of the world. These are some of the main findings of the 2011 study, which covered 17 news companies in India:

- Men outnumbered women by 4:1 among all employees (journalists and other categories) of the surveyed news companies in India. Globally, women comprised about one third of the total media workforce.

- Less than a quarter (23.5%) of Indian journalists was female. The corresponding global figure was around a third (36%).

- Women made up approximately one fifth (21%) of the governance structures of the Indian news companies surveyed (as members of company boards of directors, for instance). It must be noted, however, that the governance figure for India does not necessarily indicate professional upward mobility since many women here join governing boards as members of proprietorial families rather than on the basis of merit, qualifications or experience (exceptions notwithstanding). The corresponding figure across the globe was 25.9% or a little over a quarter.

- Less than 14% of the top management level (publishers, CEOs and others in charge of running media companies) comprised women. That was about half the global average of 27.3%.

- Less than a quarter (23.3%) of the positions in senior management (news directors, editors-in-chief and so on) was occupied by women. The corresponding global figure was 38.7% or well over a third.

- Women constituted no more than 28% (between a quarter and a third) in any of the occupational categories and levels of the news companies surveyed in India. The global situation was markedly better (though still not balanced), with women comprising 41% of senior professionals, 38.7% of senior management and 36.1% of junior professionals.

A more recent study, 'Missing Perspectives of Women in the News' (2019), commissioned by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and conducted by AKAS Consulting, involved five months of looking at trends in six English-speaking countries, including India. It found that, although women make up half the world's population, they comprise 39% of journalists and just 26% of journalism leadership globally. They are grossly underrepresented in media coverage, too, including news headlines. For example, in India women were quoted voices in only 14% of the online news stories analysed in 2019. On high-profile beats such as the economy, men's share of voices was up to 31 times higher than that of women.

The study found that gender equality-enabling social norms were "very weak in South Africa, India, Kenya and Nigeria and medium strength in the UK and the US". Overall Nigeria and India performed worse than the other four countries, sharing "many similarities in their current position on gender equality, not only in news organisations, but also more widely in their social, economic and political contexts." According to the study, "Both countries are facing major challenges in their significant under-representation of women in news

organisations. The portrayal of women in the news, as well as women's share of voice, as reflected in newsgathering and outputs, are most marginalised in Nigeria and India."

Another 2019 report, titled 'Who Tells Our Stories Matters: Representation of Marginalised Caste Groups in Indian Newsrooms' – based on a study conducted by Oxfam India and media-watch website Newslaundry, revealed the severe under-representation of marginalised caste groups in the Indian media. One of the most striking revelations of the study was this: of the 121 newsroom leadership positions – editor-in-chief, managing editor, executive editor, bureau chief, input/output editor – across the newspapers, TV news channels, news websites, and magazines included in the study, 106 were occupied by journalists from the upper castes, and none by those belonging to the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. The report also noted that three out of every four anchors of debates on news TV (among a total of 40 anchors in Hindi channels and 47 in English channels) were upper caste. In addition, the majority of the panellists in over 70 per cent of primetime debate shows were from the upper castes.

The study evidently did not look at gender representation but it is likely that women were in the minority even among the few journalists belonging to Scheduled Castes and Tribes employed or empaneled by the "mainstream" media.

This, then, is the context in which the Network of Women in Media, India, operates: as part of a deeply iniquitous society in terms of gender, class, caste, religion, region and ethnicity.

3. 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.

There are, of course, many disadvantages to remaining informal and unstructured, with no appointed leaders. It is therefore not surprising that the "to be or not to be structured" question continues to come up for periodic debate. At various times we have seriously discussed the possibility of formally registering the organisation, which would necessarily mean becoming more formal in structure, putting office-bearers in place, etc. However, in the end, the consensus has always been to continue as an informal collective.

It has become clear over the years that most members value the network as it is and has been, are apprehensive that a more formal structure would somehow change it and are unwilling to risk losing the spirit of the NWMI in the process of possibly becoming more defined. This is despite practical advantages such as eligibility to open a bank account (at present this nearly 20-year-old organisation, with over 570 members scattered across the country, still has no bank account!). As a result, in recent years, there has been less and less talk of formalising the network.

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. 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.

4. **POWER: tell us how your group has to tried to transform the way power is shared and used in the group? How has power been redistributed/shared/used to both empower each member of the group as well as to advance the purpose for which you have created your collective? Could you give at least one concrete example of such shared power?**

There has been no question of transforming anything since the NWMI has been an amorphous organisation from Day 1. 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.

This core group of founder-members, who shared a common vision and were part of the 16-month-long network-building process, emerged as an informal decision-making group, especially in the early days when the network was still relatively small, though growing slowly and steadily. Some took on responsibilities for specific ventures early on, such as the launch of the NWMI website at a time (2003) when the Internet was still a relatively new phenomenon in India and even email was not widely known or used. The core group functioned primarily as a sounding board for ideas and suggestions as and when they came up.

But soon newer members felt confident enough to propose action. For example, the first email listserv (on Yahoo), which was set up by a very new member, turned out to be extremely useful for internal communication. While her unilateral and abrupt decision at a later stage to delete the Yahoo group was painful and caused considerable difficulties, the experience taught us valuable lessons in collective functioning – e.g., to always have more than one person handling any activity and to share accessibility to digital communication tools.

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 seniors," as they are often called). 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.

Despite all the efforts towards collective decision-making and action, there is no doubt a feeling among some members of the network, especially those who haven't participated in any specific activity, that it represents the views and priorities of a few. To some extent, this is inevitable – in any organisation dependent on voluntary labour, a few people do tend to contribute more time and effort than others, helping to initiate, support and/or sustain various activities, which naturally reflect their ideas about what is important and relevant given the nature and purpose of the group. It is also possible that some members, especially those unused to collectives, may not feel confident enough to propose activities and may indeed still assume they need clearance from some authority.

In an effort to dispel such assumptions and apprehensions, periodic reminders about processes that have evolved over the years are shared in network groups. For example, a regular mailer on the process of issuing NWMI statements (see more on this below) makes it clear that any member is welcome to propose a statement, offer to draft it and lead the follow-through until it is publicly released.

5. **PURPOSE: why was this group/collective/organization/movement/other space formed? What is the feminist aspect of your purpose? What is the specific form of oppression, violence, discrimination or dominance (including towards the earth/nature) that you are seeking to resist? What are your goals?**

The incentive for creating a network came from women journalists across the country who were interviewed in the late 1990s for the book, Making News: Women in Journalism. Many felt the need for a nationwide forum for media women in India. At that time there were a few local groups in various places, but nothing at the national level. The network-building process that began in November 2000 was therefore undertaken in response to a felt need.

The informal association emerged gradually through a slow, participatory, bottom-up process that built upon earlier initiatives by media women in different parts of India. In the first phase (2000-2002), three regional workshops were held: for the south and west in Bangalore (November 2000), for the north and west in Jaipur (March 2001) and for the east and northeast in Shillong (September 2001). These meetings sought to determine whether or not women journalists across the country wished to come together and, if so, for what purpose and towards what end. The women from several states, working in different languages, who came together during those initial meetings immediately and enthusiastically endorsed the idea of linking up. Several local networks came into being as a result of the regional meetings.

It was on the basis of that collective approval that the first national meeting of Indian women working in media was held in Delhi in January 2002. Around 100 women journalists participated in the three-day meeting, approximately 60 having travelled from 16 places in 14 states. Journalists working in at least a dozen languages were present. The network

became a reality at the end of three days of intense discussion and debate that eventually led to decisions based on consensus. The NWMI was collectively conceptualised, unanimously endorsed and formally launched on 30 January 2002.

The main purpose of the network was and is to build up a supportive community of women media professionals, promote recognition of the prevalence of gender inequity in the media (in terms of representation as well as recruitment and professional growth), and to work towards greater equality and equity while challenging discrimination and harassment, including sexual harassment. The NWMI has been highlighting the problem of sexual harassment in media workplaces from its earliest days, long before the issue became more widely and publicly acknowledged; the network has been issuing statements on the subject – highlighting cases that came to its attention – from 2003 onwards. The underrepresentation of women in the media at all levels, particularly decision-making levels, has been identified as a pervasive problem. A related concern, the under-representation and biased portrayal of women in media content, has also been sought to be addressed.

Over the years the NWMI has also established itself as a promoter and defender of freedom of expression and media freedom, speaking out on infringements of such essential democratic rights and violations of the right – and duty – of journalists to speak truth to power, as well as on the harassment and violence to which journalists and media organisations are increasingly subjected.

6. **PRINCIPLES: 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 National Workshop on Women in Journalism held in New Delhi (January 28-30, 2002) brought together more than 100 women journalists from 16 centres across the country.

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.

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)

7. **PRACTICES: How is your collective practicing power in a way that is aligned with your purpose and your values/principles? How is collective feminist leadership practice in your daily functioning, in your work? Please give at least one or two concrete examples of such collective leadership practices?**

The NWMI is primarily a virtual, voluntary association of media women; most are journalists employed in media houses or independent journalists, media scholars/researchers or

teachers in institutions of media education and, of late, journalists who have switched to "content" jobs (mainly for livelihood reasons). Interaction is predominantly online (except during the more or less annual national meetings and the occasional, smaller, local events/get-togethers). The network's email listserv and social media groups (national and local) have always been unmoderated, allowing members to have free and frank exchanges of information and opinion.

Given the nature of the network, we can't really comment on experiences related to "daily functioning" within the organisation on the ground. However, the following are some examples of our efforts to function as a collective in which power is decentralised.

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 NWMI has gained quite a reputation for prompt, strong protest statements about issues of rights and justice relating to the media and/or gender & media – so much so that queries from media colleagues and organisations about whether or when the network's statement on such and such issue will be out, and questions about why there was no NWMI statement on this or that concern are now quite common.

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 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. The first draft is usually shared among members who have responded to the issue posted on network platforms for quick comments and suggestions. A more final draft is then circulated in the national listserv and social media groups with a call for comments, suggestions and/or endorsements by a stated deadline (since most statements need to be timely in order to be effective). The final statement is based on all this feedback. Only a fraction of the membership is actually active in such

processes but everyone has an equal chance to contribute to it. As a result, NWMI statements have the weight of collective approval and ownership.

A fourth 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).

Almost everyone in the network who has attended a national meeting looks forward to the next one. Photographs and comments are often shared on network social media during the course of these meetings to enable those who could not make it to get a taste of the goings-on. Detailed reports are shared and posted on the website afterwards, particularly for the benefit of members who were unable to attend but also as an effort to document the history of the network.

8. **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.

The rallying around was particularly evident during the #MeToo wave that hit India in the last quarter of 2018, with many cases of sexual harassment and assault reported by journalists and other media professionals. At the same time, unfortunately, #MeToo also gave rise to discord among members with different perceptions, especially about certain cases.

More recently, the NWMI responded to the Covid-19 pandemic and resulting media job losses in a proactive manner, attempting to provide support to journalists (non-members as well) who had been retrenched or were facing salary cuts. Initially two members opened their Twitter DMs and provided one-to-one support to those who got in touch, in addition to sharing crowd-sourced information about potential jobs. This effort snowballed into an exercise of regular job listings, as well as webinars on what could be done about the prevailing job and income insecurity and workshops on how to upskill or pivot skills to survive in a professional world upended by the pandemic.

During the second, ferocious Covid wave in India, when many media colleagues across the country succumbed to the illness, the NWMI initiated an "In Memoriam" listing of journalists and media workers who had lost their lives to the pandemic. Titled "Lest We Forget", the list was a tribute to those who had passed but also an opportunity for the living to grieve and come to terms with loss.

Nevertheless, we do feel this is an area we need to think about and address more regularly.

9. **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.

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.

10. 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/documented) 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.

20 September 2021

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