

FEMINIST
MENTORING
*for feminist
futures* THE STORIES



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A Guide to feminist mentoring and how it builds feminist leadership. This is Part 3 of 'Feminist Mentoring for Feminist Futures.' It is to be used in conjunction with Part 1: The Theory and Part 2: The Practice.

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FEMINIST MENTORING *for feminist futures*

PART 3 THE STORIES

As related by

SAYWLM initiative

Young Women Leaders and Mentors

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Introduction

In Parts 1 and 2 of this guide, we introduced readers to the rationale behind feminist mentoring as a critical adjunct to building feminist leadership, to the key psychosocial theories underlying it, and to key aspects of its practice. Both Parts contained several examples of real-life mentoring situations that illustrated both theory and practice — yet, many readers may have been left wondering how it all comes together, how actual Mentors navigate the process, and what Mentees really experience.

That is why we decided to include this Part 3 in the guide. Here we present the stories of actual Mentors and Mentees who were part of the SAYWLM project’s mentoring journey. Part 3 enables the reader to hear, in the voices and words of Mentors and Mentees, their challenges, struggles, ‘AHA’ moments, triumphs, and joys during their three-year-long shared journey. The Mentors’ stories provide a glimpse not only of how they grappled with applying the theory in practice, and that too with young women activists from diverse contexts, backgrounds, personalities, and histories, but also how mentoring impacted their lives and relationships outside the mentoring process.

The Mentees’ stories, in turn, describe their early confusion around the role of Mentors, how to relate to them, and their fears and anxieties about what to expect from the mentoring process. But as each story unfolds, they relate profound and powerful turning points in their private and organizational lives and spaces, and in their movement-building work, capturing the unique impact of feminist mentoring in their lives.

Each of these stories brings alive the pain and the power of feminist mentoring and gives new depth and texture to the concepts and practices laid out in the earlier sections of this guide. Here in Part 3, the reader will gain insight into what mentoring feels and looks like in the lives of real people who have embarked on a shared journey of feminist social transformation!



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FEMINIST
MENTORS'
journeys



In November 2019, all the Mentors of the South Asia Young Women’s Leadership and Mentoring (SAYWLM) initiative met in Kathmandu, Nepal, along with their Mentor colleagues from East Africa, to reflect on their journeys as feminist Mentors. The SAYWLM Mentors stayed an extra day for a “writeshop” where they recorded their experiences of learning, embracing and practicing feminist mentoring over the previous three years. The stories were structured around a set of trigger questions or statements, viz.,

1. This project began with a strong theoretical foundation on feminist mentoring – how did this work for you?
2. I saw how my mentoring helped one young woman show leadership in her personal life when she...
3. I saw how my mentoring helped one young woman show leadership in her organization when she...
4. I saw how my mentoring helped one young woman show leadership as a movement builder when she...
5. What did I find most challenging and most rewarding in the one-on-one mentoring process?
6. What did I find most challenging and most rewarding in the group mentoring process?

7. What hit me the most during the process? (a high, a low, an “aha” moment, an insight).
8. How did your view of yourself change during the process? OR Has this process changed you in some way?
9. Has this experience affected other relationships and interactions in your life?
10. Describe one mentoring session that you remember most vividly.

Below are the stories and insights that the Mentors shared, highlighting all these dimensions of their mentoring journey.

** Names have been changed to protect the identity of Mentors and Mentees.*

1. The Value of a Theoretical Foundation

“It was helpful to have the foundation and workshops for Mentors. It was also helpful to know that our lived experiences and practice were contributing to it, perhaps even altering or layering it.”

The SAYWLM initiative began with a strong theoretical foundation on feminist mentoring, which has been shared in Part I of this guide, and the Mentors highlighted the importance of having a framework to follow.

To help understand and assess the practice

“Having a strong theoretical foundation, with respect to feminist mentoring, as the starting point of the project was extremely useful. While I have been involved in many forms of mentoring over the years, beginning with coordinating the mentorship program for local and overseas interns [at a major cooperative bank in my country] to mentoring interns while working at Christian Aid in the United Kingdom (UK), feminist mentoring is different from mainstream mentorship models in some important ways. While, as a feminist, one may be aware of this intuitively, it is a different thing altogether to have things laid out in a way that makes it much easier to understand those differences. For me, the theoretical framework provided not only a good understanding of what the expectations are in terms of the role of the Mentor but also gave me the necessary criteria by which to assess my own performance and identify the lacunae therein.”

Am I the right person?

“I was surprised when I was invited to be a Mentor for the SAYWLM project. My initial reaction was that I know very little about feminist mentoring, I’m not a

gender expert and I am not sure if I'm the right person. There was some trepidation, uncertainty, cynicism about what I was getting myself into. I wasn't sure what to expect from the mentoring workshops and the Training of Trainers (ToT). I had never really immersed myself in such a process.

During the Mentors' training workshop, we discussed situations, case studies and learnt through role play. As someone who has been directly and indirectly mentoring young people in my work as a media practitioner and film festival director/professional, I had never consciously thought about mentoring as a process or working within frameworks. It was more intuitive, largely practical advice after listening to people and their problems.

The first Mentors' workshop introduced structures, frameworks and concepts on feminist mentoring. I was exposed to a whole new world that resonated with and translated into my current work. More significantly, it compelled me to think, reflect deeply, internalize and unpack, even if uncomfortable at times, what I was doing, why I was doing it, and how I interacted with groups, individuals and other women in my personal and professional life. While the program was about mentoring young women, I realized it cannot be done a hundred percent without being honest with oneself, facing your biases and fears, setting ideas, putting yourself on the spot and being open. ””

To mentor, not simply coach

”” A passion drove me to this space, to say yes to feminist mentoring. However, I was not very sure of what it meant in practical terms. I tried to check the meaning of mentoring in my language in the dictionary and on Google, but couldn't find it. I realized that in my previous work with ex-combatants we had used the words “coaching” and “mentoring,” but now I feel that we had totally missed out on mentoring, because we had been so busy *coaching* them. ””

The struggle in following a framework

”” The theoretical framework was a good starting point, to get an idea about what mentoring and especially feminist mentoring could look like. Through the process of practicing mentorship though, it sometimes felt quite difficult to actually follow the

framework all the time. While filling in the Debriefing Forms¹, I would notice how I have deviated from it. This often made me feel like I failed to stick to the framework.

Looking back, the framework helped a lot to internalize most of the mechanisms for mentoring. It helped to have a set of tools/mechanisms which I could use to navigate and practice. Many of those practices have been internalized and are much easier to practice now. In [workshops with the other SAYWLM] Mentors, I also felt supported knowing that I wasn't the only one struggling to fit my practice to the theory at all times. ”

It's okay to be organic

“ The strong theoretical foundation on feminist mentoring gave me a good perspective, grounding and learning, as all theories do. It is good to have theories back you up for any practical work you do, it always adds value. But sometimes, only sometimes, while conversing and when the conversation is very personal and organic, theories tend to hinder the thought process and block the flow of sharing and interacting. To be aware and internalize the theories is good, relevant and important, but to always link the thought process to it may not be good. ”

Avoiding the Doctor/Expert mode

“ Another gift [of the theoretical framework] for me is that my default gear is the 'Doctor' mode and sometimes 'Expert' mode,² [but the SAYWLM mentoring experience made me] realize that this is not a sustainable approach, with anyone – not even when dealing with an eight-year-old son or my 80-year-old father-in-law! I am still practicing how to be in the 'being' mode now... not in a 'doing' mode. ”

1 Forms that Mentors filled in with information on the mentoring session. This was a particularly useful practice since the SAYWLM initiative followed a method of rotational mentoring.

2 Two Scheinian Models of mentoring referred to in Chapter IV, Part I of this guide.

2. The Impact of Mentoring in the Mentee's Personal Life

The Mentors narrated stories as related to them by their Mentees.

“I saw her negotiate her relationship with the burka. She wore it. She took it off. She went for driving lessons and took it off. She practiced agency. She spoke about it in her one-on-one calls.”

The Mentee claimed equal rights to the family's property

“She [my Mentee] told me that she fought to get a share of their property from her parents, equal to her brothers. When she heard that in [the national] constitution, the property rights clause was reformed to give women equal share, she gained the courage to file a case against her family. She [initially] told her parents she will file a case against them when they chose to transfer their property to her brothers. [They argued that they had] kept aside some money for her marriage expenses and dowry, and that was equivalent to her share, but she challenged this. Finally, [after a lot of struggle] her family gave her an equal share of the property.

Life was not easy for her with the family. She was not allowed to interact with the family and was treated as a culprit, even by the neighbors. Walking with her through this hard time helped her gain the confidence and reaffirmed that what she was doing was [justified].”

Mentees' sharing the deepest and most difficult personal issues

“After two years of mentoring, this Mentee shared something very personal. She had been trying to have a baby for the last 2–3 years and was undergoing IVF

treatment, which had taken a toll on her health and her emotions; she sometimes felt depressed and experienced highs and lows. This had strained her relationship with her husband a little. Suddenly her husband said he wanted to adopt a baby, that too immediately. She was traumatized.

I didn't know how to respond since I know I am not a counselor. I asked her how she felt about adoption and what she felt comfortable with. She wanted a baby of her own — she didn't want to adopt, at least for now. During the whole mentoring session, I listened full of empathy, and I stressed on the fact that she should not blame herself. No one's life is perfect, and it only looks like it from the outside. It is how one copes with it, with positivity and inner strength. I gave examples of my own life to her, and although the situation and context were very different, it was a time of trauma [for me] where I had placed the blame on myself. I also told her that sharing with someone who understands you and making time for your own well-being is important, whether it is watching movies, going out with friends, reading, listening to music, exercising — each one has a different way of [de-stressing and] absorbing happiness, and she should do that more often. She says that she still remembers that conversation and has stopped blaming herself. She had an open conversation with her husband around pregnancy and adoption, and he is more understanding now. And although she does get bouts of lows, she has been able to come out of it and deal with it better.

She goes out with her husband more often as well as her girlfriends. Her husband now recognizes himself as a feminist and helps her with the kitchen work. She is now consulted in major decisions, when earlier she was treated like a doormat. When his [husband's] friends come home and tease him for following his wife and doing the chores, he answers saying, when there is equality, it is better for everyone.

They haven't talked about adoption for the moment, and she feels that she will deal with it as and when she is ready, or when they are both ready. ””

Navigating family relationships

“” The Mentee described the difficulties she was facing in terms of certain family dynamics. While her family was overall supportive, her status as a divorced woman and a single mother had led to certain tensions that would periodically crop up in

family discussions. By helping her discuss how she wanted to frame her identity in a society like ours — which is heavily patriarchal and values a ‘woman’s role’ — particularly in social terms, the mentoring sessions [she claimed] gave her the strength to stand up to her family. She was able to tell them that she felt pride in her identity as a single parent, whatever wider society might have to say. She was also able to articulate to her family members that while her status as a divorcee and single mother might be considered awkward or shameful by others, she was entitled to expect and claim support from her immediate family members. She was also able to point out her value as a strong female role model, not only for her daughter but also other young female members of her extended family.

Related to this, we [the Mentee and I] further discussed the difficulties her daughter faced in terms of family expectations, as well as within the broader social context. We discussed the importance of her understanding her daughter’s situation and laying down boundaries with other extended family members in order to assert that as the child’s mother, she is best-qualified to make important decisions regarding her daughter’s wellbeing.

We discussed some of the strategies that she could use to improve the relationship between them [daughter and herself], including establishing their strength as a two-person family unit. In addition to exploring these various family dynamics in theoretical terms, we also identified practical steps that could be taken to make immediate changes. At the end of the discussion, the young woman repeatedly expressed her gratitude for helping her achieve certain insights into the complex web of family relationships between her and her natal family, as well as with her daughter. ”

Entering the Mentee’s emotional and physical spaces

“ The Mentee said, when I asked if I could rest at her place before going to the airport: ‘Yes, sure, you can come...I will come and pick you up from the hotel. Yes, don’t worry. I will bring you to my room to rest and recuperate before your flight home.’ I told her, ‘I feel terrible that due to my illness, I will not be able to meet the community young women leaders (CYWLs)³ and you were so excited for me to

3 The Mentees/YWLs in turn train young activists in the community, referred to as community young women leaders (CYWLs).

meet them.' To which she replied, 'It's okay, I will brief you, and my CYWLs will understand.'

As promised, she came and picked me up in a taxi and brought me to her home — a rented room at the end of a long and narrow corridor, on the third or fourth floor of a dilapidated building with no lift. She was sharing a room with a friend. For all the tenants occupying the six-seven rooms in that corridor, there was one small shared bathroom. All the tenants seemed to be living in what appeared to be impoverished conditions. And, there she was, allowing me access to her most intimate space, with poise, dignity and such a wealth of trust. She showed me a small photo album with pictures of her family and opened up with such honesty, sharing the stories of her troubled family, but with such love, warmth and affection for them. She showed me the space on her steel cupboard where she will place magnets from different places that she wishes to visit.

This was a woman who, when I had met her for the first time two years ago, had been reticent, unsure, and seemed to be going through a deeply troubled phase in her life. On this day, I saw her present herself as a strong, vastly self-assured young woman whom I have been co-mentoring over the past two and half years. ”

Supporting Mentees with personal challenges

“ [As soon as we began the session I could see that] This Mentee was clearly struggling and I had to ask a few times before she told me that she had recently found out that she has diabetes. She hadn't told anyone in her family as she was worried that they would not know how to handle this; how would she get married, how would this affect her work, etc. I gave her a chocolate and told her to eat it, because if she was feeling sick it was probably due to not having eaten anything since lunch.

All I could think of telling her was about my own family's history with diabetes. I had grown up seeing all of my grandparents, uncles and aunts and eventually my parents, coping with the disease, and diabetes is something I expect to have to live with eventually too. So I have also always thought that it will be a part of my life. I didn't have the 'Doctor' answers for her, but at the end of our conversation she agreed to go get a proper diagnosis done and a plan for how she would manage the

disease. I assured her it was not the end of the world at all!

During the next few months, we spoke about this a few times afterwards, not as a mentoring agenda, but just as: ‘How is your health now? Have you spoken to your family?’ I didn’t get detailed updates, but the confidence she had in saying that everything was well showed that she had it under control.

The last mentoring session we had, before she transitioned out of SAYWLM to her new job (at a new organization), she mentioned that she had informed her new employers about her health condition. Because her work would be field intensive, she wanted to be upfront about it. She had informed them that she is managing it well, but also explained the possible constraints in terms of needing to maintain regular timings for food and rest. Since she would be located outside of the city, she also inquired about medical support that would be available if needed. The employers were understanding and provided her with information about their locally based doctor and relevant support. They had also arranged an appointment with him as part of her orientation schedule.

All this to me represented the Mentee claiming ownership of her disease, acknowledging it, and taking control of managing it. She did not feel a need to hide it, and was confident enough that she would be able to take on this new job regardless. She is no longer a Mentee and we don’t stay in regular touch. But she seems to be thriving at her new workplace, and I have full confidence that she will go places, in her life and in the movement! ”

3. Impact of Mentoring in the Mentee's Professional Life

“[I saw the impact when a Mentee] questioned leadership in her organization. When I saw the SAYWLM journey affirm her inquiry and enable it too. It made her unapologetically believe that her leadership in the organization was her right to claim.”

Finding organizational recognition

“ This Mentee is very independent in her own way and we had always noticed that. She is confident in how she carries herself, interacts with other young women leaders (YWLs)⁴ and in professional spaces. So, it was no surprise that when we visited her organization, the Executive Director seemed on board with the program and was supportive of the Mentee taking forward this initiative on her own.

In these two years, she has found avenues to gain more training and has participated in gender focused trainings and other workshops regularly. She planned it out and started having small gender related sessions during their regular organizational meetings with other staff members. Given that she was focusing on this area, she was also asked to start looking into developing proposals and working on the gender component of proposals. Sometime later, she got promoted as the gender focal point for the organization. [It is interesting to note that] this organization, that earlier did not want to be tagged as a feminist organization [is] today submitting proposals and inputting resources into projects that even they define as feminist! ”

4 The term 'Mentee' and 'YWL' are used interchangeably in this publication.

Battling sexual harassment

“One particular Mentee faced a situation of sexual harassment and was initially unsure on how to come to grips with the situation. The harasser was in a position [in the organization hierarchy] where his behavior affected her day to day work and her work performance — he was able to refuse certain kinds of assistance that she required in order to do her job properly.

After we [the SAYWLM team] strategized about the situation, she was able to come to terms with her feelings of paralysis and fear, and develop a method of dealing with the harasser, which involved not allowing him to affect her on a daily basis. Following this, she started to feel less afraid and took away some of his power over her. This came about through a combination of strategies: communicate her needs in terms of work support to her senior management (in order to side-line this individual), as well as deal with the individual concerned in a confident and assertive fashion to make it clear that he had no real effect on her.

Additionally, we worked out a method to solve her difficulties in obtaining tech support [such as updating virus protection software], which the harasser was withholding from her. A member of the SAYWLM organizing team sent out a group message asking all YWLs to update their virus protection software. Since the email went out as a general requirement to all, she was able to forward the notice to the harasser and copy her senior management within the email, thereby ensuring that the necessary steps were taken. Upon obtaining permission from her Executive Director, she then simply purchased the antivirus and left the bill on her harasser's desk so that he could take care of the matter thereafter.

Most importantly, discussing the issue made her realize that while the situation was uncomfortable, this individual did not have effective power over her. Therefore, she was able to stand up for herself and put an end to the harassment by making it clear that his behavior would not be tolerated. In the final analysis, she chose not to report him to the senior management, but that was primarily because she felt that she had been able to deal with the situation successfully herself.”

Campaigning for change and dealing with backlash

“ I was in hospital tending to my ailing mother when I received an unscheduled call from a Mentee. She spoke calmly, in measured and soft undertones. But I could hear the apprehension in her voice, the anger and frustration as she recounted events of the past few days.

The Mentee explained that a young man from the village where she worked was about to marry an underage girl from another village. It was a kick in the gut. She felt the carpet had been pulled from right under her feet. Because for the past two years, the Mentee has been relentlessly working to build a movement against child marriage in the area. What made it harder was that she knew the boy's family and was on really good terms with them. She had tried to reason with the parents and had requested them delay the marriage for a few years till the girl came of age. She had also confided in a member of the local network against child marriage, a woman police officer. Now, the Mentee was receiving threats from the boy's family and, as a result, worried about her own safety. She was confused: should she alert the media? Should she file a legal case? Should her organization and like-minded activists intervene? She had also thought about the repercussions of any of these actions. The head of her organization had advised her to let it go; despite being activists, there was only so much they could do. But I could sense that the Mentee wasn't happy about this. She strongly felt that they couldn't back down. They had to set an example. But there was some apprehension too.

Meanwhile, I was in a quandary. My mind was racing. Was she safe? What should I tell her? Would my advice be putting her in harm's way? I had been put on the spot. I wished I could consult with the other Mentors. However, I pulled myself together. I said it was important to ensure she was in a safe space and that her organization knew what was happening — it wasn't just her burden to bear. She had to alert the local network. I encouraged her to weigh the pros and cons of the situation, think rationally and not be swayed by emotions. She had invested so much of her time, energy and passion in building a cadre of young women and a community who were committed in sensitizing the local population against child marriage.

During the past two years of her [the Mentee's] work to build a movement against child marriage in her area, during our mentoring sessions, she would excitedly speak

about her discussions with her CYWLs; about how they were hungry for information and action. She was worried that she might let them down, always thinking of ways and means to sustain their interest and commitment. I was concerned that she was taking on too much and would burn out. Despite the initial roadblocks, lack of cooperation from the organization's board, and her own self-doubt and confusion, she has owned the program. She's run a media campaign against child marriage, formed a formidable local network of CYWLs, Non-governmental organizations (NGOs), media practitioners and local government, and trained her CYWLs on concepts of power, patriarchy and feminist leadership. She has questioned and challenged her board when she had to, fretted and frowned when she has heard of a case, rejoiced with each little victory when they have managed to prevent a marriage from taking place, [which they have occasionally succeeded in doing in other cases].”

Discovering her power within

“Whenever I think about the word ‘mentoring’ *she* always comes to mind. My first interaction with her was not very good. I felt that she had been there for just a few months, like the previous two YWLs from her organization. The organization probably did not communicate with either her or the Mentors about the change and suddenly she was told by the organizational leadership team that she would now be the YWL!

I can still remember her face when she entered the second training workshop in July 2018. She seemed lost and nervous, trying to register the faces of the people sitting in the room. She sensed the rest of the YWLs bonding — they had all been part of the mentoring journey together for more than a year and half.

It was very clear from the response of her organization head that she was put on the spot because no one else in the organization was ready to continue the work of the previous YWL. My first feeling after a short interaction with her was that we are not going to see her succeed. But even with that strong conviction, I felt that I was waiting for this opportunity to work with someone new, like me, since I too joined the mentoring team more than a year into the process.

To my surprise, she ended up working smoothly with different stakeholders, ensuring

that the orientation workshops [they were conducting] at different colleges should not be limited to only students. She decided it was time to engage college authorities and leadership – she knew that working with a handful of like-minded people will not be enough to build the movement.

During my last visit to her organization I was so impressed to hear her Executive Director and the Chair of their Board say that she is a strong pillar of the organization. She was breaking the power structures within self, organization and community. She is now seen as a resource to innovate new ideas and lead the community work on the issues. ”

4. Mentoring for Movement Building

An important goal of the SAYWLM initiative is to promote the movement building approach in tackling gendered injustices in communities, and to equip the young women activists (the YWLs) with the understanding and skills to mobilize women and young girls in their communities to take collective action around an injustice that they had identified as a priority. While the SAYWLM training workshops provided an understanding on movements and covered the key steps of the movement building approach, Mentors had to reinforce and support this in, and through, the individual and group mentoring process.

“What I have realized from my mentoring [experience] is that it is not easy to go in with the assumption that NGOs and community mobilizers working with the purpose of building women’s collectives will by default be good activists and easily lead movement building work with the women in the communities. Before reaching the stage of movement building, there are many factors that come into play — some of them relate to the personality and capabilities of the Mentee, which can help [or hamper] her in movement building. But other factors lie outside the realm of the Mentee’s skills and capabilities.”

Dealing with resistance in movements

“One Mentee explained how, despite some degree of success in generating enthusiasm among community members over the key issues of her project, she was feeling demoralized as a result of continued resistance from a small but stubborn group of people who seemed opposed to her efforts. During our discussions, we

worked out a strategy to address such resistant individuals through a combination of several methods: targeting key individuals for one-on-one discussions, targeting less resistant members within households of such [resistant] individuals, so that they might be able to act as advocates for the cause, identifying potential male role models within the community who could visit men at the resistant households (since men usually tend to be more responsive to advocacy efforts by other men) and so on.

For a start, this re-energized the YWL herself, and over time the new strategies that she adopted began to show positive results. This was very encouraging for the YWL as well as her CYWLs. By more effectively addressing these resistant elements within the wider community, this young woman was able to strengthen the movement for change within her project area. ”

Persistence in movement building

“ One YWL, who works on the issue of child marriage in a rural province, was very ambitious in the beginning. She was excited and wanted to eradicate child marriage from her whole district. Right from the start, she wanted to work together with International NGOs (INGOs)/NGOs working in the district and form a coalition. That’s how the usual NGO projects work and she was attuned to that [approach]. After many mentoring sessions, she finally zoomed in on an area that had 65 households and the most number of child marriage cases. From the beginning she wanted to conduct a survey within the whole district, but then decided to conduct it within that particular area and mobilized her CYWLs [after training them] on how to conduct surveys.

The survey may not have been perfect, but it gave the CYWLs an opportunity to visit every household, talk to family members and feel the pulse [of the community]. The community members were skeptical at the beginning, since many NGOs/INGOs had come to that particular area but had not done anything concrete.

Every week, the Mentee and her CYWLs held interactions with members of the community, showed them documentaries and videos, and had discussions on the issue of child marriage and other issues related to it. She has now mobilized [and capacitated] her CYWLs so that they are trusted by the community members, the local government, and schools, where they have held talks, competitions and

performed street plays. A committee has been formed with an elected woman leader, a CYWL, a school and police representative, an INGO and another local NGO, and a government official that meet regularly to tackle and address the issue of child marriage. A strong movement is being built and there have been no further cases of child marriage in that area. ””

Building momentum for self-care

““I saw how my mentoring helped one young woman show leadership as a movement builder when she examined the relationship between desire, work, rest, self-care and women’s lives. She introduced the idea and a subsequent program at her organization on the right to self-care and rest. She built on ideas such as providing lunch in the office and a resting room. [To enable open discussion about usually taboo topics like desire] she often referred to her young mother, who was widowed, and how she [the Mentee] was also building conversations with her mother, on and around desire. ””

Movement building with CYWLs

““This one YWL would often talk about how some of her CYWLs are very passive while some are active. The ones who are active tend to take initiative, organize their own meetings or take the lead in discussions taking place with the larger community. They are the ones she is confident would be able to lead this work even after the project is over. She was wondering if she should try to find other CYWLs who could then be added to the group, so there would be more ‘successful’ CYWLs in the group.

During our mentoring session, we talked about how it was good to maybe consider that not all of the CYWLs will have the same strengths. We also talked about how the different YWLs in our own group had different kinds of strengths and as a result designed and implemented their projects in different ways.

We asked this YWL to think about whether she could identify different positive attributes that she had seen in different CYWLs, and if she could think of other roles that they could play. For example, if someone was not a great speaker, she might still be good with organizing the event or designing posters. We also spoke about our experience in realizing that different YWLs engage differently with us; some need

more explanation and discussion, while some are more interested in doing their own research into various issues. I mentioned that I too prefer to stay in the background in most situations unless I must take the lead [for some reason/s]!

We also tried to highlight discussions we have had before about what attributes made a good leader and that being outspoken was only one of these. She [the YWL] listened to us, and agreed to try a different approach. We did not try to offer any specific way that she needed to go about this.

At the next group session, she announced that after the previous session, she had spent some time reflecting on how she had been engaging with her CYWLs. *'I realized that with time, I had become more and more inclined to interact and expect support from the 'active' CYWLs. I would call them up to organize meetings, to call up the others or to take the lead on activities they were going to do without me,'* [she said]. She recognized that in some ways, she had been leaving out the other, less 'leader-like' women in the group. Once she realized this, she made some conscious plans to break out of that habit.

Soon, she was pleasantly surprised that more CYWLs had shown interest and taken up more responsibility among the group. Most of them still preferred not to take up the role of conducting community meetings, but they have been attending more meetings, participating more in the conversations, and have been more active overall. *'I had not expected it would be so different. And it was me, this whole time — all I needed to do was be more conscious about how I was dealing with them.'* ”

“Sonakshi joined the SAYWLM project several months after the other YWLs did. The previous YWL in her organization had left because her family was opposed to her working in an organization that supported LGBTQI people and issues, and because of the stigma attached to such work. She [the current YWL] had been volunteering at the organization as a social worker, a stand-in for the previous YWL, so it was natural that she stepped in to fill her shoes. Given the previous YWL’s family’s resistance to her work, I wasn’t sure if or how long Sonakshi would last. At our first meeting she appeared pleasant but nervous, a little out of her depth, unsure about what was expected of her as a YWL and whether she would be accepted as a replacement for the previous one. She was unfamiliar with the concepts of power, patriarchy and feminist leadership, had missed the inaugural ToT, so there was a lot of catching up to do.*

Time progressed. We got to know each other over one-on-one calls and group meetings. I learnt that she was a student of social work and had joined the organization as a volunteer to get extra credits for college. Prior to this she had little exposure to individuals from the LGBTQI community or their concerns. Her stint there had opened up a whole new world — she had never encountered anyone from this community or thought they existed. Over the course of time, she took over the helm of a campaign to sensitize high school and college students, and its faculties about LGBTQI issues and their right to education. I admired her openness, curiosity and genuine interest and concern.

I looked forward to our calls. Her work at the organization had exposed her to several narratives different from her own. We would discuss issues around sexuality, consent and understanding the other, and through them, our own biases, quirks and preconceived notions and learnings. I would rejoice in her little victories, when a particular school agreed to sponsor a scholarship for LGBTQI students or when one of her LGBTQI CYWLs returned to their old school to speak about their coming out, [and I listened to her] indignation and frustration when people refused to see the LGBTQI community as she did; at times she felt like she was banging her head against a brick wall.

I was amazed at how she linked the concepts we had discussed to the work she was doing at the organization. I could see she was moving away from a social work approach to a rights-based, movement-oriented approach. One day she invited me to a function to celebrate the international day against homophobia. I spotted her in the midst of a group of her CYWLs, part heterosexuals, part from the LGBTQI community. She appeared very much at home in their midst.

She invited me to attend a session where individuals from the LGBTQI community visiting from outside Kathmandu generously shared their stories and lived experiences with the CYWLs. It was a safe space which she had helped create. Listening to them, I realized that she wasn't just a social worker anymore, she was a catalyst — instrumental in encouraging understanding and openness towards the 'other.'"

The SAYWLM initiative consisted of both one-on-one sessions and group sessions, and Mentors and Mentees worked on a rotation-basis. The SAYWLM Mentors shared their insights on being a part of both one-on-one sessions and group sessions in terms of what was most challenging and most rewarding.

Rewarding aspects:

- I felt proud to contribute to their [the Mentees] feminist journey. To have the time to talk about their personal issues and how they are dealing with it.
- Hearing their sense of peer support during the group call is always very interesting.
- When they shared that they felt that we are always there with them to support them in a personal and professional way.
- We realized that we are doing something concrete to shape up the future leadership in this region, that they now see themselves as a resource to raise and lead their issues.
- When they recognize us as their collaborators and partners.
- A YWL was recognized as staff of the month [by her organization] and she said that 'it's all because of you Mentors'.
- When we all help each other to address the issues, rather than criticizing each other for not doing the work in this way or that. That amazed me! That they [the Mentees] see themselves as collaborating, not competing with each other.

Challenging aspects:

- Though we work hard with them [the Mentees], sometimes they say that they are not well and cannot attend group meetings, and on the same day we can see them on Facebook doing something else. That sometimes is very frustrating – when they try to avoid the group meeting/call, without being honest about it.
- When they are not prepared to attend the call, and talk about random things. So we [the Mentors] asked them to write down the points they want to share with the team [beforehand], and we established a few norms: (i) Do your homework before you speak; (ii) Maintain the calendar and share your availability; (iii) Honor your words; and (iv) Be open and share what is going on within you, with the Mentors. Now we do not face this challenge so much. But, in all our interactions we try to reiterate the values, principles of feminist mentoring, and how we are going to follow it in our life.
- A big challenge for me was the guideline that as Mentors, our talking time should be less than ten percent. I was surprised by that – how is it possible for them to speak for one and a half hours and for us to just listen? Initially it was very hard for me to follow that, and I used to tell my fellow Mentors that I was not a good Mentor because I was talking around thirty-forty percent. Maybe I am not designed to do this feminist mentoring work! [However] Now, with practice, I am able to maintain my limit to nine-ten percent, and I do not use the Doctor/Expert model at all – not even when I'm dealing with my kids, or in-laws, or neighbors, or my work colleagues! This is a big achievement for me.

5. One-on-One Mentoring - Highs and Lows

“ I found practical things challenging, such as Mentees not showing up for calls due to being overburdened [with other tasks]. This happened a lot during the last three months of 2019. In December alone the call dates with one Mentee were changed four times — she was either at an event or dealing with a crisis situation at work. This happened with all three Mentees.⁵

I also found it challenging while waiting for some of the YWLs to join the call — one [of them] was particularly anxious, perhaps wondering what to talk about. I sensed anxiety and worked to remind her that this was her space and time. It was challenging and I could not go beyond the wall of [the Mentee feeling]: *‘I need to tell you something because we are on the call’*. This Mentee has been absent from several group calls too. It has been hard to access her.

What was rewarding was that the one-on-one call is a journey within itself. As one YWL put it, she didn’t come with an ‘agenda,’ but spoke about her situation and in articulating this she processed her thoughts and feelings towards her situation. She didn’t ‘present a problem’ but rather I offered to become a safe space for her to share, and process while sharing. I remember one Mentee feeling shame and guilt for her behavior. I felt good to hear that she was beating herself up less after the call.

It has been rewarding to feel gradually and deeply trusted [but] also challenging because [in one case] I felt responsible for a Mentee dealing with [her] mental health. I had to ask myself if I had the capacity to contain her, support her. I had to check with another Mentor after this.

It has also been rewarding to have a three month rotation system with YWLs and be part of one Mentee’s journey over a period of time. It feels like a continued process.”

⁵ Although the Mentors met in November 2019 to reflect on their journeys as feminist Mentors, some of the stories were sent in later, such as in early January 2019.

“The most rewarding aspect of one-on-one mentoring was undoubtedly having the privilege to see the personal growth, albeit sometimes to varying degrees, that the majority of the YWLs displayed. In some cases, it was pure pleasure to work with the YWL concerned and to see how far they were able to progress as a result of their participation in the project.”

The need for patience

“For me, perhaps one of the most challenging aspects of the one-on-one mentoring process was dealing with the differences in the attitudes of various YWLs. While it was easy enough to work with the young women who were engaged, even if I did not always agree with their approach, it was much harder to sustain the same level of commitment (and patience!) with those who were uninterested in the initiative — especially [the YWLs who were in the process] as a result of being nominated by their organization, rather than out of any sense of feminist consciousness or any interest in being a changemaker. I did my level best to work with the latter with the same degree of commitment — and a significantly heavier dose of patience — as I demonstrated in my work with the former.”

The ups and downs in mentoring

“It was good to have a system in place, having one call a month with a Mentee and being able to share the calls with the other Mentors. Initially, I thought it wouldn't be too difficult managing a couple of calls a month. But later, I realized that because of work, other commitments both on mine and the Mentee's part, and sometimes the gravity of the issues or the disposition of a Mentee, I would find myself procrastinating a call. Having other Mentors on the team was great. Initially, I welcomed having the

mentoring Debriefing Forms⁶ as a reference. They served as a guide and helped me when I was stuck for words or ideas in the mentorship process.

I looked forward to calls with some Mentees since I knew they were more engaged, forthcoming and easier to talk to. It was rewarding to hear the excitement in their voice, tap into their enthusiasm when they spoke about their work and projects and their CYWLs, and notice a shift in their learning. It was rewarding when I found myself drawing inspiration and ideas from them and revelling when they had an ‘aha!’ moment.

Sometimes it was challenging to manage calls, also because I didn’t look forward to talking to some Mentees as I found it was like trying to extract information, and sometimes felt ill equipped to do so. Also, trying to stick to the conceptual frameworks was a struggle at times. I would find myself wondering how the other Mentors were doing, also if the YWLs would compare us and have a preference for a particular Mentor. Was I a failure if they didn’t want to speak to me? ”

Establishing a personal connection with the Mentees

“The one-on-ones are a very specific space where I got to explore personal connections with the YWLs. Especially when and if I got to meet them face to face, the informal setting would allow us to explore our conversation without an agenda as such. I tend to find little nuances in those conversations, it also opens both of us up to communicate more genuinely with each other. As someone who is usually used to keeping my communications a bit distant, it has also been an accomplishment for me to learn to open up to the YWLs in these conversation spaces. ”

Creating safe spaces to overcome challenges

“Most rewarding in the one-on-one sessions was to hear YWLs’ stories of overcoming obstacles and little acts of defiance in their personal life, and the way this capacity also contributed to changing the practices of leadership in their own organization or in communities they worked in. This was rewarding to see because many women rights activists and feminists don’t walk the talk. It was fulfilling to see

6 The forms Mentors had to fill in after each mentoring session, capturing key issues discussed, and any follow-up points. These are described in Part 2, Chapter 9.

how they are creating examples [of feminist leadership] that they themselves have rarely come across.

It was challenging to create a safe space for the YWLs. Creating safe space needs a lot of time, energy and consistency. As we Mentors worked [with different YWLs] in rotation, I felt like I wasn't [able to create] the safe space for the YWLs because of the rotating system we were following. Working with the same YWLs for some time, and by choice, would have helped me more. ”

“One-on-one sessions require a specific mindset and space to be able to be attentive, interested and reflective all at the same time. I myself am also not someone who enjoys phone calls much, so these virtual sessions also came with a hint of anxiety for me. It was difficult to create the right space for these calls, and prepare myself almost every week for them.”

Bridging the generational divide

“ One-on-one mentoring has been a fulfilling, rewarding and overall, an interesting and insightful experience. These calls fulfilled my interest and need to interact with a diverse cross section of young women. It expanded my circle of relationships with young women — earlier I had just one young woman (my daughter) to think about, talk to and hear from — now I had ten of them to talk to and hear their stories. It fulfilled my need to see for myself whether I can engage and be accepted even if it meant having only a small toehold in the space inhabited by young women, and feminists of the Generation X and Y. These conversations have allowed me to try to expand the intergenerational feminist dialogic space, allowed me to learn about the millennial issues of the young women. This has also brought about its own set of challenges, wherein I am required to be conscious and keep a soul mirror always

ready, so as to avoid being patronizing and/or the indulgent older adult/mother, and overcome [adopting] the smugness of a seasoned professional! ”

To work within a framework

“ The most challenging part, especially at the beginning, was having the picture of the Debriefing Form at the back of my mind during the one-on-one mentoring and steering my conversations around it. Also, reminding myself: I am not a teacher, a preacher, a guru or an idol who knows everything... Our work is not to solve their problems, but to steer conversations so that they see their own potential and find answers to their challenges. We have been so accustomed to thinking that we are experienced and have worked for many years that we know it all! Also, the thought of everyone as equal, both Mentees and Mentors, takes some deep conditioning.

The most rewarding in one-on-one mentoring is when Mentees lower their guard and see us as equals, unafraid to talk and share about their personal and professional life, without fear of being judged. Some of their sharing, both at the organizational and personal level, has been intense. ”

6. Group Mentoring - Highs and Lows

“I remember that at first the YWLs did not know what to do with group calls. The Mentors were facilitating it. These were new relationships. Many YWLs would not show up. It felt staggered, odd even, because the group would be silent. It took a very long time and [the use of] several approaches for the group call to become what it is today.

I remember asking the group to imagine the potential of the group call. We worked on the idea of one Mentee or YWL facilitating the group call every month. It has since grown into becoming a safe space of reflecting, [listening to] individual experiences and creating collective insight. The YWLs are stepping into their role as facilitators in this process too. The group call has grown into a space the YWLs look forward to, lead and make their own.”

Harmonizing Mentors' diverse approaches to the YWLs

“The most challenging aspect of the group mentoring process was accepting the fact that as Mentors we did not always view the potential of a YWL in the same way. It was also important to discuss each other's perspectives on some of the young women, in order to make sure that we did justice to each of them.

The most rewarding part of the group mentoring process was learning from the other Mentors' approaches. Each of us brought our various experiences and baggage to this role, and I certainly was able to learn a lot as a result of considering the perspectives of the other two Mentors on some of the key issues. It was also very satisfying to see how our styles combined to more effectively support the YWLs than our individual approaches might have done.”

“The group mentoring process has been a slow process of warming up as a group; it is like cooking on a slow fire, where someone has to keep fanning the dying embers to keep the stove burning. So there were times during the process when the discussions and the process didn’t leave a good flavor and feeling at the end of the call. The cooked dish didn’t have the richness, texture and flavor of all the spices. I mean, the life stories of the ten YWLs and their unique personalities had all the right ingredients and flavors to [potentially] cook up a storm during the group calls!

However, there were some group sessions that were very enriching, with some of the YWLs’ stories providing high emotional texture to the discussions, and some making genuine efforts to make the discussion more engaging. There were some YWLs who would lend richness through their deep personal reflections or insights on the concerned issue. This made the discussion and the process wholesome, allowing everyone to take a deep dive into their personal and political self during the call.”

A safe space

“The group calls were intermittently quite intensive capacity building sessions and bonding sessions, which were quite enjoyable. I think we all recognized it as a safe space to share and discuss both professional and personal issues which we couldn’t do so in other forums. Most of the YWLs looked forward to the capacity

building sessions. Having resource people and experts [on the group calls] was helpful for Mentors too.

Sometimes trying to fix a time for the group call could be challenging given the work schedules of the YWLs and the Mentors. If we were doing face to face meetings, it would be difficult for people outside to attend; sometimes, we experienced technical problems which affected the Zoom call participation of all the Mentees. Sometimes Mentees may have felt pressure to perform during the group call. ”

“What was rewarding was the space that was created for sorrow and happiness [as a result of group mentoring]. A safe space where they knew they could talk about any issue. The sense of courage that they provided to each other implying – we are here for you, you don’t [have to] feel alone.”

A fulfilling experience for the Mentees

“ Every group meeting has been rewarding and insightful and I feel the Mentees have gone away much more fulfilled after the group mentoring. It is also because they get to hear each other’s experiences and challenges. Many times when I had one-on-one calls after the group meetings, the YWL described how she implemented something that was shared by another YWL during the group meeting – some strategy, methods, ways of conducting meetings and also ideas for activities. The most rewarding thing I feel is that the YWLs are not in competition with each other, but treat each other with respect and deep trust, as resource persons, and both question and reach out to each other. This is evident during the group meetings.

I feel this space for both Mentors and Mentees has become a special, safe and sacred space. It has developed and evolved into one through time and the commitment of both Mentees and Mentors. So we have tried to mix it up, sometimes we have had resource persons talking on topics they have wanted to know more about,

sometimes it has just been open sharing, while at other times we have had trigger questions relating to patriarchy, power, movement building, feminist mentoring and feminism. Many times the YWLs decide what they would like to discuss next too; what to discuss and talk about next month is always there at the back of my mind. ”



7. Rewards, Challenges and “AHA” Moments

Building power to share power

“Being aware of the fact that the YWLs journey was teaching me about India. I felt closer to the ‘many Indias’ through their personal and professional lives. I realized how rare, unique and special this is as a learning experience for all of us, including me.

The process made me reflect on my own leadership and I am wondering if this same can be explored with the YWLs — hence my proposal [that I put forward to them], to invite YWLs to reimagine a movement-building organization run by them; how would they design and run it?

I think it is hitting me again as I write, that this is an individual journey of building capacity and leadership that rests on building the same for those around us, and for those building the movement. We are learning to build power to share power. That shared power is the vision.”

Looking below the surface

“For me, one of the most interesting things was to realize that despite many years of dealing with different personalities and feeling that I am a reasonably good judge of character, I could still face an instance where one of the YWLs seemed to be ‘difficult,’ and then discover — after excavating the reasons behind her apparent stubbornness — that there might be a very good explanation for this.

For example, with one of the young women, I initially got the impression that she was unenthusiastic about her role as a YWL. I soon discovered that the problem was, in fact, an issue of personality, whereby she did not respond well to a more robust approach from the Mentors. I realized that she had a good understanding of and commitment to the issues at hand but was of a very reserved personality, which did not display to advantage against her more outgoing peers. Once I accepted that my initial assessment had been wrong, it was much easier to work with her, and I grew to appreciate her capacities to a much greater degree. It was an important lesson for

me that things can often be very different from the way they appear on the surface, particularly when it comes to accounting for the human factor in such interactions.”

The Mentee to Mentor cycle

“For me, an ‘aha’ moment was when the YWLs said that they see themselves as Mentors and take the experiences they have had with us as Mentor-Mentee to try and share it with their CYWLs, keeping alive the feminist principles of mentoring. Their sense of pride when they talk of their CYWLs; how they have started leading programs and initiatives by themselves, is rewarding. Almost all of them have said they feel more confident, are more aware of their political self, and also recognize how power comes into play in their everyday lives and can now articulate, question and address it.”

A lost opportunity?

“One [individual session] that I remember most vividly was a very frustrating one. It made me sad. The Mentee kept saying ‘*What should I talk to you about....*’ ‘*Let me tell you what I told person X the other day...*’ I was sad to see her so anxious to start and end the call. In retrospect, I would have tried to devise ways to make her more comfortable, but instead I was thrown off and only saw the surface of this behavior. I worked to remind her then, that the call was hers and mine, ours to build and that she could bring up anything she wanted to, that it does not have to be a ‘problem’ to solve or anything to process. This call was probably over eight months ago. We haven’t spoken since. I know she isn’t as present in the group calls either. I am not sure how to reach out still.”

A breakthrough with a new YWL

“It was an organizational visit. The YWL was still new to the [SAYWLM] program and did not share a deep bond with any of the other YWLs yet, nor with the project perhaps. Spending the day and half with her, at her organization with her CYWLs, made me realize that the YWLs come from varying geographic, cultural contexts and also unique personal histories/herstories. The visit felt like we started a new relationship and she was learning to trust and open up to processing things with me

and also her CYWLs. This YWL had joined the program one and a half years after it began and was picking up on what had been left behind and what was hers to lead from there. She was guarded and perhaps a bit anxious before I visited. It felt like two delicate days, but I left both knowing her better and having opened up to her more.”

Inspiring moments

“Lena* [a Mentee] called me up late that day. We'd both been caught up in our respective jobs and finally managed the time for a one-on-one call. I was tired after a hectic day. I guess she was too. I was planning to keep it short if possible, an hour at the most. Dinner was waiting, so were my kids. Lena began filling me in on her month's progress and activities. The usual 'hullo' and 'how are you,' done with, we touched on her action plan, workplace politics and the progress of her CYWLs. As she described to me in detail a new project she was leading, where she was required to work with women in local government positions in several districts, my interest peaked.

The way she described her role, the terms of reference of the job in the field, and her work on the ground, stirred my memories; I was reminded of my younger self, I felt energized, a bit envious and wanted to know more. The questions flowed naturally, I was curious about her work, how she was managing and responding to the challenge. Her enthusiasm and excitement were palpable. She came across as confident and mature. I recalled our first meeting, her sitting across the table, unsure and sullen, speaking in monosyllables, as I struggled to drag a sentence out of her. Back then, she appeared to doubt her abilities, her organization's support and commitment and felt they didn't understand or trust her capabilities.

In the past two years, I have seen her struggle to make sense of concepts of power, patriarchy and feminist leadership and their application in real life situations. I have [also] seen her diligently and conscientiously engage adolescent girls from 12-16 in movement building initiatives, constantly questioning her own ability to do so. Her confidence in navigating her space within her organization and analyzing her role as a wife and daughter-in-law in her recent marriage and family life, has increased so much. It's hard to describe the feeling. The hair on my arms rose. The realization hit me. It wasn't my Mentee talking to me, it was a fellow professional, a peer. I

forgot dinner and shooed my daughter away as she hovered around me. Lena and I continued our conversation.”

Ups, downs, and insights

“During the second annual training workshop, the YWLs had prepared power points in our language on the issues on feminism, power, patriarchy and movement building. They had divided themselves into groups and worked together. When they presented these to their organizational CEOs and supervisors, I felt extremely happy for a number of reasons. The heads of organizations had not expected this from their staff and seeing that confidence and change gave them a new perspective about the YWLs. I think after that, there was more ease, trust and respect from the heads towards the YWLs. The YWLs themselves felt confident and assured; they were actually presenting for the first time to a bigger audience. I realized they had finally internalized the SAYWLM theory, its objectives and goals.

One ‘low’ was when two organizations changed their YWLs right at the start of the second annual workshop and did not inform us at all. They suddenly arrived with new YWLs with no prior communication, and I felt very low. I kept blaming myself, thinking that in spite of all our efforts to conduct things correctly, both with the YWLs and the organizations, I had done something wrong in the process. Moreover, I knew both the heads of the organizations [that made these changes] very well, and this unnerved me. I kept questioning myself, my ability and my engagement in the SAYWLM project.

Meanwhile, a few insights I gained are: It is always good to put yourself in another person’s shoes and not expect instant results. If everyone’s heart is in the right place, results will show eventually. It may be a slow process, but the end result is rewarding. [I also realized that] having all the Mentors on the same page, understanding each other, not in competition with each other, sharing and complementing the process will enable the Mentees to grow and be nurtured well. Choosing the Mentors is of utmost importance, and the Mentors’ clarity about the process is very essential. Otherwise, the result may be warped and may confuse the Mentees. This will definitely hinder their growth, thoughts and actions.

This process and its success are both individual and collective. One without the other

is not going to be fruitful, and it cannot be exclusive of each other, which is also how different this process of feminist mentoring is from coaching. ”

“I always try to remember: This is not about YOU it is about THEM.”

“I vividly remember an interaction with one of the YWLs regarding her assessment of a young woman she had encountered, who had found herself in a highly compromised situation. The YWL was extremely well-meaning and optimistic in nature, so her reading of the other woman’s situation was very compassionate. She wanted to help her and was convinced that she had a handle on the situation. I felt that her reading of the situation might not be quite accurate, but not having been present and not wanting to discourage her sense of compassion or her desire to help, I was initially careful in sharing my concerns about the possible pitfalls of her assessment. We discussed the situation in some detail and I tried to point out a couple of the red flags that I had noticed, but I did attempt to do so without dampening her enthusiasm to help. In the situation that subsequently unfolded, it turned out that my hunch about the other young woman had been accurate. The YWL realized this herself gradually when certain things did not add up.

We had a follow up session where the discussion focused on this case, as well as a couple of clarificatory conversations in the interim. The YWL herself was honest and good-humored in admitting that she had jumped to certain conclusions and been manipulated or played by the other young woman. I was impressed with her for accepting her mistake with grace and choosing to turn it into a learning opportunity. I also enjoyed the discussions we had around the case and found it fascinating to see her gradually come to her own conclusions about the situation. As a result, this remains one of the more memorable interactions I have had with the YWLs.”

8. Impacts of Mentoring on the Mentors and their Lives

“I am like a river flowing and along the way I collect many stones, sticks, leaves, branches that flow with me, some land on shore quicker and leave, some flow together a long way but it is still an experience and a journey together.”

The Mentors of the SAYWLM initiative shared their insights on how the mentoring process changed them, in some way; how they viewed themselves during the mentoring, and how this overall experience affected their relationships and interactions in other parts of their lives.

Change within the self

“ I have no doubt that this process has changed me in more ways than one. I have had to remind myself to put the interests of the project and the development of the YWLs ahead of my own ideas of how things should be. I have had to adapt my approach, depending on the personality of the YWL and to learn to recognize (yet again!) that one size does not fit all.

Having said that, it has been immensely rewarding to see that in the majority of cases a more nuanced – and in that sense, tailored – approach has yielded the best results. In addition to a rewarding outcome, I feel that undertaking the role of a feminist Mentor has also brought out in me unexpected resources of patience and understanding, sometimes well beyond the depth that I thought I was capable of. As a result, the process has offered me considerable opportunities for growth, in addition to [the] growth I have seen emerging among the YWLs. ”

Awareness of power

“ I have thought about power unlike ever before. I examine the Power Within.⁷ I check in with myself on whether I am working with power in my ideal ‘feminist self’ way or if I am unconsciously misusing it. I have become more conscious [of power]. I have never received a formal structure or theory that allows me to understand patterns; there was always a feeling of ‘but I must learn to negotiate better,’ but not knowing why or in response to what [kind of] climate, or even why that climate existed. There was a risk of being gaslit. But today I can recognize this and make decisions based on what I have been equipped to notice. I feel empowered too.”

New friendships and new understandings

“ It has made me familiar with, [allowed me to] build relationships with and understand the NGO sector and feminist movements in India. I am grateful to have received this as an entry point for potential future relationships. The SAYWLM program has also offered friendships [with Mentors from other countries], and I will always be grateful for this. It has allowed me to step into my own power without reducing my own light in any way. I caught myself dimming my light in the past and I don’t do that anymore. It allows me to be more comfortable within. I notice where power is being subtly abused or taken for granted and I draw boundaries in those relationships.”

A reminder to look beyond the surface

“ I’m not sure that I would say that this experience has profoundly affected other relationships or interactions in my life, but I do think that in general terms it has reminded me of the value of patience and of excavating, with some degree of delicacy, what lies beneath the surface of others’ behavior. In that way, it has served as a useful reminder when it comes to dealing with other relationships and interactions in my life.”

7 A concept taught during the initial SAYWLM training module on power, referring to the agency, capacity and strength we carry within ourselves, activating which is a critical part of the empowerment process.

To be kinder to myself

“I have learnt to be less harsh and critical of myself in the process. I try not to give solutions and answers to everything, and try and help others seek the solutions themselves, whether it be my family, friends or children. Most times my family and friends have looked up to me for advice and support and I have been the strong, wise one. But I have realized it is okay to be weak and vulnerable and not always strong. It is okay to take a step back and enjoy [yourself].”

11

YOUNG WOMEN
LEADERS'
journeys





The Mentees or Young Women Leaders

The 30 Young Women Leaders (YWLs) of the SAYWLM project represent a diverse landscape, but were selected using the same criteria: they had to be between 18-35 years of age; should have been working in the organization for at least two years; should be a staff member that the organization is interested in developing as a potential future leader of the organization; and needs to be in a role that actively engages with the women in the community, with whom they would then develop and carry out a movement-building strategy to tackle a gendered injustice they identified.

As a result, the 30 YWLs who became part of the project (and some who joined during the project to replace YWLs who had to leave mid-way for various reasons) all came from different backgrounds and had very different interests and experiences working with women in the communities. The projects they drew up and the changes they envisioned were wide-ranging. For example: ending early and forced marriages, ending sexual harassment in public transport, working to ensure that marriages of community members are registered, gathering and documenting the stories of local women “sheroes,” modernizing the curriculum of the *madrasa* (a college for Islamic teaching) to encourage more girl students, and persuading schools and colleges to welcome and create a more inclusive environment for LGBTQI students. The YWLs also experimented with various forms and mediums, from forum theatre, theatre of the oppressed or “liberation theatre,” making a YouTube video on sexual harassment

and disseminating this at multiple meetings with different stakeholders, including officials, parents, teachers, and local authorities.

Capturing their mentoring stories is important since all the YWLs associated with the project, for whatever duration, recognized and acknowledged the vital role that mentorship played while they experimented with negotiating power in their communities, organizations, families and even within themselves. The YWLs bravely walked a path of self-exploration, building trust and alliances with the Mentors and each other and diving headlong into the process of learning and reflecting. Each of their journeys was full of challenges that they willingly analyzed to create more effective and empowering responses. This section of the mentoring guide is one way of celebrating their effort. It also provides an invaluable insight into how mentorship can be experienced and utilized by young activists to strengthen their leadership in diverse spaces.

The case stories captured in this section almost all make reference to “CYWLs” or “community YWLs.” This is the term used for the cohorts of young women living in the communities where the YWLs did their movement building work, and whom the YWLs identified, trained and mentored using the concepts and mentoring techniques that they themselves had received in the SAYWLM project.

These stories have been culled from the lengthy interviews that CREA’s Monitoring and Evaluation team conducted with YWLs from each of the three countries (India, Bangladesh and Nepal) between June–August 2020. Only the portions relevant to the guidebook have been included here. We hope these provide readers a glimpse into the transformations that mentoring enabled in the lives of these young women.

Most of the case stories were translated into English from Bangla, Nepali and Hindi, and edited for grammar and coherence.

Names have been changed to protect the identity of the YWLs.

NAILA

I was fearful of the mentoring process. I had heard that one had to measure one's words while speaking to the Mentor. That as a Mentee I could not reach out to the Mentor until and unless the Mentor reached out to me. Later, my perception changed after my interaction with the Mentors.

Now, for me, a Mentor means a guide and friend with whom I can share everything – from personal to professional. It was because of this one Mentor and her sensitivity that I was able to throw away my earlier understanding. Whenever I have a session with her, she gives me the opportunity to speak, which has encouraged me to bring about changes within me, in line with my feminist politics. Mentors have played an important role in my life and have helped bring about a positive change.

A good Mentor-Mentee relationship

Mentoring becomes a useful process only when Mentor and Mentee both give time to each other and provide opportunities to speak. Only then do they build a good relationship. Mentors listen to us with patience and provide guidelines for support as required. Personally, I learned how to listen to others, give importance to their arguments and then build one's own argument or solution. I learned how to have patience at work, do the work in detail and provide explanations as needed. [These changes have] increased my involvement in various activities within my organization. My opinion on various project activities is now considered and accepted.

Three positive approaches in the mentoring process

There was one session that influenced me a lot. I was still new to the process and used to take all issues for granted – feminism, patriarchy, social norms and violence. I used to normalize these issues and never thought about them in-depth. In that one session my Mentor helped me critically think about such issues and question everything. I learned to think of the rationale behind the issues and the layers, and ask repeatedly, 'why? why? why?' I learned how to question each step and understood how one incident led to another incident. During that session, she helped with a problem-solving exercise. Next, the Mentor had a friendly attitude which created an

easy conversational environment. Finally, my Mentor shared experiences from her personal life, such as an incident from her school life involving one of her teachers. This process influenced me a lot. As a Mentee I also shared some happy memories from my childhood which she wanted to know. This process of sharing both ways, this give and take, was very heartfelt.

Identifying the feminist and Mentor within

I believe that the mentoring process helped me think of *myself* as a Mentor. The mentoring sessions were always educational and interesting. I have always tried to learn from them, identify my problems, find solutions and find coordination between my thoughts and my work. Mentoring sessions also helped me critically analyze my positive and negative aspects and think in a more comprehensive manner. This not only resulted in a positive change in me but also built my self-confidence and knowledge.

Since I grew up alone, I had no connection with my external environment or with anyone in particular. It was through the SAYWLM project that I identified the “feminist” in me. I used to be hesitant to talk freely or share things, even with my friends. But, that has changed. The mentoring process provided me with a lot of opportunities to showcase myself. Now I am an extrovert and can make use of my inner power.

Since I [now] see myself as a Mentor, I communicate with young women and try to support them in finding solutions for their myriads of problems. I try to make them understand that everyone has potential. Taking necessary action, gaining knowledge and using that information and knowledge appropriately to take action can definitely improve our quality of life. I have learned a lot from my Mentors and I am imbibing it in my life – to be on time, be patient, to take action and strategize depending on the situation, to give importance to others – all of these have influenced my own mentoring.

I truly believe that mentoring is beneficial and supportive of building young women’s leadership. If one is a good learner then one will always benefit from mentoring.

MALA

When I was selected as the YWL, we were told that they needed young women, relatively new to the field. I thought I met the criterion because I was not very familiar with the development sector. I knew very little about what would mentorship would mean...

Leading to a process of self-discovery

From whatever experience I had, of working with organizations and observing their work from a distance, I did not see them opening up spaces to involve the staff and other stakeholders in problem identification and generation of ideas. So my expectation at the beginning of the project was based on this presumption.

[When I first joined this process] I thought a Mentor is similar to a leader who shares her ideas to help guide; someone who would lay out the plan for implementing her ideas and support people to work on it. But [after] the process of talking with the three Mentors of the SAYWLM initiative, I realized that mentoring is a comprehensive process of self-discovery. It helps individuals explore and realize their potential. This process, in my opinion, leads to empowerment.

One impactful conversation with the Mentor that I remember happened six months into the project. I had drafted a plan and shared it with the Mentor. She made me think deeply about the plan I had sent, the long term implications and other such trigger questions. These trigger questions altered the way I looked at the work and changed my thought process. I started to think about the vision, mission and strategy. As I was answering these questions, I realized that mentoring was very different to what I had imagined.

Building confidence

The mentoring process has made a huge contribution in building my confidence. Most organizations have a tendency to ignore newcomers and those placed lower in the power hierarchy. To add to this, I consider myself an introvert and I am a little shy. I felt I was ignored within my organization. But after I joined SAYWLM, I saw

things shifting. I started realizing that I was being noticed and recognized in my office. After a few sessions with the Mentors, my introverted nature diminished and was replaced with self confidence. Now, I can put forward my ideas and reasoning in front of other people, including my seniors in the office. The mentoring process has given me the knowledge and skills required to share ideas with a group of people and the confidence that such an act takes. I strongly believe that no one can aim to be a leader or a Mentor without these qualities. Now I have the confidence to handle leadership roles.

Providing skills to ignite feminist movement building

Mentoring, which is a major part of the SAYWLM project, has been a turning point in my life. Because of SAYWLM, I got to learn about feminism, feminist movements, patriarchy and other such theories and their practical application. I felt changes within and saw the onset of a process of empowerment within myself. I also learned about gender relations and power dynamics, and their impacts on society through this process. In order to ignite feminist movement building, one requires great skills. The mentoring sessions taught me these skills, which gave me support and enhanced my knowledge and level of understanding.

As an individual, I have spent a lot of time introspecting about Power Under and Power Within.¹ Through this project, I have learned that as a leader, I cannot let my Power Under dominate the power relations between me and those I work with. Now, I try my best to not fall into this trap, especially when I am in a leadership role. This was a huge change for me.

Taking all the necessary steps for a feminist movement

There are a number of political and social issues that go on around me, which, before joining the SAYWLM program, I generally ignored. Now, not only have I started noticing these issues, but also started analyzing them in the broader sense with a feminist and gender justice lens. If I'm supposed to build a feminist movement, I

¹ Different forms of power and its relevance to feminist mentoring is explored in Part 1 of this guide (Chapter 4), these concepts were also consistently explored in the initial and refresher training workshops with SAYWLM YWLs.

cannot sustain it without enough knowledge of the political and social developments in the country, especially those affecting the communities I work with. There are steps to building the feminist movement. As understood during the ToTs and other mentoring sessions, I came to know that without enough knowledge on current issues and public concerns, we cannot initiate a movement building process. To build a robust movement we must select a suitable issue/s and agenda, appropriate leadership, suitable processes, supporting strategy and policy, and a goal, which is the most important part of it. Feminist movements must be inclusive, and members of the movements must have a feeling of ownership as well. I have learned all these aspects during the sessions with the Mentors and at the training workshops I attended.

I started with trying to address the issue of sexual harassment faced by young girls in the schools. I campaigned and held awareness generation programs in the city with teenage girls from the community and government schools. Initially it seemed very challenging. I was struggling with ways to initiate conversations and bring people to act. But now my sessions revolve around sharing concepts of feminism, patriarchy, feminist movement and root causes of social injustice and gender injustice, with the teenagers. These have helped in building rapport with them and laid foundations for building their sense of agency. The credit for this way of working goes to my Mentors.

Not alone in the fight for feminist societies

There is almost zero collaboration between all those working on gender issues in various organizations. Bringing the ten of us working with different NGOs together, at the country level, gave us a lot of reference points to practice, room to correct our mistakes and work on our faults together. We also do not have any space to share, celebrate and appreciate each other. SAYWLM brought us ten young women together and created this space. Finally, it gave us strength to know that we are not alone in this fight for feminist societies. Group mentoring sessions also helped me correct my judgmental attitude. I gradually realized everybody was working towards creating a space with less judgment and more support. And then, the words of appreciation that the Mentors gave during these meetings were also very encouraging and always helped us work for more. I can see my understanding of and attitude towards LGBTQI persons have changed drastically.

If we could hold more meetings with the older feminists so as to understand the gaps they have bridged and [how they have] helped us secure the rights we enjoy today, the younger feminists would gain a lot. Mentorship is very useful for all these kinds of processes. I am planning to use this group mentoring platform to bridge the gap between the old and the new generation of feminists in my country. I feel my responsibility has increased and that makes me proud.

Breaking the spiral of silence

Initially, I used to feel I was loaded with information, and the monthly calls felt like too many things being taught in a short span of time. But gradually, I started realizing the importance of all of those conversations, especially for my personal development and career. Initially, I also felt that the one-on-one sessions were quite intense, but that too changed soon when I realized that these sessions were meant to talk about the personal aspect in detail. It was a safe space to discuss confidential things. Most of us young women have learned to stay in a spiral of silence in the face of discrimination and abuse. I felt the one-on-one calls were a space to open up and talk. This one-on-one process that I witnessed with my Mentors, I carried with me as a Mentor to my Mentees. This gave them [the Community YWLs] a very safe space to talk about their issues which they otherwise could never speak of. If organizations also adopt this one-on-one method of conversation, it would allow for attention to issues like mental health [of their staff].

All three Mentors are experts in their field, so talking to all three of them was very helpful. All our issues were taken up by them with their own unique perspectives and angles. At the implementation stage, we had three different alternatives finally to resolve the issues we faced. It felt like huge support.

KIRAN

“I always thought mentoring is about the professional and never the personal. I had thought mentoring would help me learn about my progress, competencies etc. My understanding was more corporate. I never had this kind of training before.”

Learning to open up

I am not a person who could easily talk about myself. I used to be quite closed. Even at the first training workshop in 2017, I withdrew from everything and never participated. When the mentoring started, I realized that this process was very different. I never realized how time went by with the Mentors in the last three years. Earlier, whenever calls with the Mentors were scheduled, I used to get worked up about what I will talk about for an hour. But now I have so much to share; before every call, I know what I want to discuss.

Self-exploration in a comfortable space

The Mentors knew their boundaries, and I knew mine. It never felt like we were trespassing on each other's personal space. It felt like a safe space that inspired trust, so I never felt intimidated. After two and a half years of mentoring, I was able to open up about the issue that had been bothering me a lot in my life. I lacked self-acceptance. I have been living with bipolar disorder for 6-7 years. After an unpleasant experience with my previous therapist, I was very careful about sharing with others. I remember I had a conversation with one of the Mentors and initially hesitated to open up. It wasn't because I couldn't trust her, but I did not want to repeat the same mistakes and create a relationship of dependency.

I decided to go ahead and speak to her anyway. I am currently exploring my identity.

I keep questioning if this need for identity exploration is because of my bipolar disorder. It was a big struggle for me. The Mentor told me I need not fit myself into a box and encouraged me to question my thought processes. After that, I stopped feeling unsure about my quests. She helped me realize that I have to stop judging myself. It helped me take on my self-exploration in a more comfortable space.

I felt that both the monthly calls as well as quarterly calls [with the Mentors] worked for me. I never felt like I had to pick and decide what could be shared with which Mentor. Whatever concerns I had, I would discuss with all three of them. If I had a question for a specific Mentor, I was always given the space to write to them and ask for a separate conversation. There was flexibility, and I learned new things at every session.

Accepting my own story

I was abused as a child from seven to 13 years of age, and I always felt that it was my fault. I opened up to one of the Mentors, who mentored me in a way that the doubt which had haunted me all my life, that this whole situation was my fault, ended.

I used to run away from conversations about abuse while working in an organization that worked on such cases. But gradually, I started accepting my own story, accepting that I had gone through that experience. Recognizing that it was not your fault was a very important step. Professional growth cannot happen without looking at the personal, and this mentoring process helps in understanding that. Mentoring helps with the glitches and blocks that stop you from moving forward.

Building movements through collective action

We began activities with the community. The CYWLs started understanding their agency and started working on issues in their everyday lives that they felt were problematic. People in the community started trusting us. Individual, as well as collective action, started taking place around civic issues, violence etc.

Mentors kept bringing me back to the idea of movement building. Initially, it [the CYWLs' work] wasn't going in the direction of building a movement but was still confined to individual action. With support from the Mentors, I started exploring

ways to direct these individual actions to small collective actions. For example, in one of the communities where we work, the lanes in the area are quite narrow. One man had installed a camera outside his house. He would harass the women and intimidate them by telling them he could see what they were doing; he would tell them their routine and mention specific details of the activities they were involved in. We approached the police, but nothing happened. Finally, around 70 families together signed a complaint and went to the Municipal Corporation. Due to the large number of people involved, the Municipal Corporation took quick action, and the man was arrested. Later he was released on bail but was not allowed to stay in the same lane. Because of this collective action, people have started trusting us a lot. These collective actions are emerging into a movement; I have seen it. We are still exploring how we will take it forward as a larger group.

One of the Mentors used to end each session by asking how I see my work as leading to a movement. That helped me bring my focus to movements building space. I adopted the same approach with my CYWLs. I used to ask them about how they see their individual actions in the larger backdrop of the community and their issues.

DEENA

“The idea of a project which was managed and run by me, was the most important aspect of the SAYWLM project. I picked [a project centered around] self-care after talking to the women in the community.”

There was a time when I was filled with negativity. However, one of the Mentors made me realize the skills I already possessed and the ones that I gained while working at my organization. Most importantly, the Mentors supported my exploration of self-care by which I learned the existence of mental health, apart from physical health. She [the Mentor] made me realize my leadership skills by explaining the work I have done (with the help of my colleagues). There have been a lot of positive and impactful things I have done during the past three years, the credit for which definitely goes to several people who were involved in the SAYWLM initiative. But I will never say that I have not done anything. She made me realize that it was the first time that the CYWLs had started recognizing the importance of mental health and that in itself is a huge achievement, and I should be happy about it. I knew I had worked really hard, but the feedback I was getting from my organization was putting me down. It was here in the presence of the Mentor that I felt that there was at least one person, apart from myself, who believed I had done substantial work. That gave me a lot of confidence and positive energy.

Learning to use my own perspective

Before starting work here [the SAYWLM project], I had a very different perception of what feminist mentoring is. During this time, there were a few problems in my organization, and my colleagues were considering resigning, and soon a very good friend of mine decided to leave. In this perplexed state, I talked to one of the Mentors, and she explained different perspectives in which I could see and deal with the

problems I was facing. The Mentor made me see that I had started operating from a place of bias, and I was not using my own perspective to define and analyze things for myself.

Mentorship to help in professional and personal growth

My exposure to mentoring before this was only through my organization. I could not tell the difference between a supervisor and a Mentor. During the first Training Workshop in Nepal, I realized the difference between the two. It was here that I realized that a supervisor only supervises your work while a Mentor acts as a guide to make you understand how to look at issues, how to work on your ideas and what problems one might face on the way.

Before SAYWLM, I used to see a Mentor as someone who would provide direction to the Mentee. But after becoming a part of this project, I realized that a Mentor helps their Mentee find or choose a path for themselves. The Mentors here made me realize that if the path is paved by the person walking on it, then the journey is easier and would get more efficient. The kind of mentoring that my organization was giving can only help in professional growth, but the kind of mentoring I got from the SAYWLM project helped me take a deeper look at the personal space. It helped in advancing in the personal arena as well. Now I have reached a place where I feel that mentorship is important if you are to take up any project or work diligently on any idea.

RUNA

There was an assumption that this mentoring process will continuously monitor what we were doing, if we were meeting deadlines, etc. But, this [notion] was busted very early. It was clear there was not going to be any hand holding.

Mentors acting as witnesses

Conversations with the Mentor made it clear that they wanted to capture what this journey was like, for us. For me, this [feminist mentoring] felt like having a witness to my journey. As women we lack witnesses to our lives, are instrumentalized so quickly in everything we do and therefore, taken for granted in all the roles we play. To have someone listen so closely, ask questions and check in makes you more aware of yourself, but also makes you feel seen. That was my big moment: Oh! I finally have a witness to the inner turmoil and the outer, the personal and professional, and all of these different roles we keep juggling between. There is someone who understands all of those connections.

Establishing quiet confidence within a Mentee

Every two to three months I had a pivotal conversation with a Mentor. As I fill in the project's endline survey form,² I see what a massive shift I have experienced. The feminist mentoring of the SAYWLM project has helped me be much more assertive and sure of myself. [When working] in an organization which is 25 years old, It is very easy to feel too young or irrelevant to the process.

² The SAYWLM endline survey was conducted by Gender at Work, the project's M&E Consultants, in the form of surveys and interviews with the YWLs to assess their change in knowledge, attitudes and behavior on core concepts of the project.

At work, I was struggling to explain that a certain project cannot be restricted to project outcomes; it has to be inward looking and consider our feminist practices. I was going through a really tough time trying to set up a frank conversation with all the under 35-year-olds in the organization. I was sincere about this, so I used to send designs to staff members higher up in the organization. However, I would receive it with comments on how my plan did not refer to entitlements, numbers, etc. During a call with the Mentor, at a time when I was doubting myself: maybe I am not equipped, maybe I am too young, maybe I do not understand what the core issues are because I come from a privileged urban background, so I feel talking about sexuality is important. The Mentor walked me through my feelings, asking “why did you want to do this?,” “Do you still think it is important to talk about these things?” She did not directly tell me that I was right. She helped me figure out what my politics were and where I was coming from.

Two things happened in that call [with the Mentor]: first, it helped me articulate my feminist politics and validate it myself, and second, it set in motion this process of quietly finding confidence to say that while I might not have the same years of experience as someone else, I bring in a valid point. I wrote back to my organization stating that while I understood their concern, this [project that is inward looking] is also important. I emphasized that we [the team] will be going ahead with my plan, and ensured that the organization could come back if they felt that something had gone wrong.

This felt like a quiet foot in the door for me.

To frame around one's ideals and politics

My family has been very progressive. My parents were always involved in the NGO sector and were my barometer. I idolized them, my father more than my mother. However, over the last couple of years, I started recognizing and pointing out gender equations in my house. One big moment of assertion I felt was when my wedding came around. My partner and I wanted to make sure that the ceremony was meaningful for us. We rewrote the vows, got rid of the “Kanyadaan” ritual (giving of the ‘maiden’ girl as a gift), had wedding arrangements that supported the local economy, and everybody contributed. Throughout this whole process, there were multiple conversations I had with the Mentors; I kept asking if I was pushing too

hard for the sake of this feminist ideal and if I was pushing something unnecessary. The Mentors repeatedly assured me to keep in mind that I had to make it meaningful for myself, as long as I was not hurting other people in the process.

During earlier trainings I had said that I want a feminist wedding. At that time, I had not thought it through, not really understanding what feminism means. But when I look back, I feel, had I not experienced feminist mentoring, I simply would not have been able to pick out everyday things that bother me and frame my ideas and politics around it. And then, make sure that something like a wedding, which can be so performative and awe-inspiring, transpired the way I wanted it to.

Locating and examining one's own politics

I really appreciate that all the Mentors had very different points of enquiry. The Mentors asked basic questions like what feminist principles I was using in my initiative; adding a rigor of needing to examine where we are locating and bringing in feminism to our work. My abilities, [in asking and examining these questions] sharpened over time. I could then bring these skills to meetings, trainings, and to my organization.

FAZILA

First I was given the training and the know how, to build ten leaders. Here, I explored my leadership. Then I was responsible to make my CYWLs realize their leadership potential. These girls were then further required to build leadership within the community. My ten CYWLs further worked with ten women each at the community level. We had 111 leaders by the end of this process. This started our movement.

Earlier I was alone. Now I have 110 YWLs who are fighting together, some are completing their education, choosing to delay their own marriages and talking about their rights. This kind of understanding about movements, we did not have before. We got it from the SAYWLM project. We got to understand the importance of movement building for social change. We even started sessions with school girls and added them to our movement building [process] and work towards change.

Gaining confidence and leadership skills

The confidence that a leader has, I now feel it in my body. I never felt it before. I used to be shaky about taking decisions before. However, since I joined the SAYWLM initiative, not just me, but people around me including in my organization have started noticing the leader in me. At training programs when my CYWLs were asked, “who do you aspire to be like?,” they would say my name. The resource persons conducting the training would tell me that I have gained leadership qualities, which the CYWLs were seeing and aiming to follow. All of this confidence helped me with my work.

To receive community and family support in advocacy efforts

In November 2019, we planned a ‘Meet to Sleep Campaign’.³ Around the same time there were protests and unrest around a new citizenship law and identity registration in our country. We had prepared everything [for the campaign] at a local park, but

³ A campaign that invites women to gather at any public space, usually parks, and sleep in comfort there, to fight against harassment.

several parents refused to let their daughters come.

When I went to talk to the girls, their families started shouting at me. They started saying that so many things are happening around the country and being a Muslim myself I should not be putting forth illogical ideas like taking the girls to sleep in a garden. I got very worked up and then called up a Mentor. She supported me and said we can try and arrange this again, later. She suggested I talk to the girls and their parents, assure them that we will stay within our group and remain within the confines of the park. The parents were irritated at the beginning but gradually understood that we were not doing anything wrong. The Mentor was in touch with me continuously, helping me understand and come up with solutions to the issues that I faced.

Finding inner strength as a Mentee

My parents are not with us anymore. I think a lot about my family and their wishes. I also feel the community's pressure because I have exceeded the "right" age to get married. But I think, if I do not feel like it, I might not get married at all.

At the beginning of 2019 our organization had listed what we would be doing during the year. I had committed that I wouldn't get married this year and will work on my initiative with SAYWLM wholeheartedly. I accomplished it with all sincerity. In 2020, I committed to the same again and decided I will fulfill the responsibility of leading a project of my own. This confidence to stick to my decision, I had not felt before. I used to feel pressured when people around used to talk about my marriage. But when I saw this Mentor, single, strong, a decision maker, I felt so confident and motivated. Now I tell my family very clearly that I will not get married and if I do, it will be to the person I choose.

Earlier, I used to worry about getting married to a person who is not supportive, and of losing my strength. But today I feel even if I do not get married, I can stay strong on my own. None of the Mentors looked at me as a single woman and judged me on the basis of that. They never said that I should have a partner to support me or that I need one, for that matter. They always reminded me that I am a very strong woman and that I should keep building on my own strengths. This gave me immense confidence. They kept asking me to think about my growth. I learned that

I need to think about my own self as well, along with thinking about my family, my work and community. I have learned that I should listen to my inner voice first. If I keep listening to what people are saying about me, my confidence will keep shaking. And now I have reached a stage where I tell my CYWLs as well, that we need to first understand our own importance for ourselves. There is no need to wait for other people to make us feel important.

More often than not, I have come across people who are working on gender related issues but are fundamentally patriarchal in their approach. But, the Mentors and my association with CREA have made me see that there are people who can live by feminist principles.

Setting examples to bring about the change I want to see

Now I have also become a Mentor. I have learned mentorship. The patience with which our Mentors dealt with us, the confidence they helped us gain has made a huge impression on me. Even if they had issues in their lives, the care with which they interacted with us taught me a great deal. Now I am ready. I can mentor people in my organization, in the community and even in my family. I mentor and guide my niece who now sees me as her idol. She stood her ground against her family when they were forcing her to get married last year.

I have learned to try and listen to the other person with patience and try and understand their point of view.

VEENA

I had experience in campaigning and activism, in verbally raising my voice for women's rights issues. But, I lacked confidence and could not lead. The Mentors have played a very important role in transforming me from what I was to what I am now. The frequent one-on-one discussions, group discussions and informal talks with my Mentors gave me the strength to lead 15 CYWLs. They [Mentors] showed me the way through their mild advice, often just adding some points to my decisions and opinions, but this led me to realize that I am not wrong. I have the capacity to handle work independently. Now I am trying to follow the path of mentoring at the community level.

A path to leadership

Although I was at a senior position in my organization and would participate in various programs, I never expressed my opinions among people. I was schooled into believing that the personal is political, but, for me, this in effect meant to bring the issues to the notice of the seniors in authority. I realized during the group calls that every individual has their own identity, perspective towards life, and the things around that must be heard. The regular one-to-one and group meetings, clarification of concepts and theories, sessions I attended physically or over Zoom sharpened and clarified my whole understanding of the root causes of social problems, as well as how to lead stepwise and prepare others for action. That foundation has been laid. Mentoring has shown me a way to leadership. It has helped change my internal knowledge and the capacity to work in public. I had not received a chance to lead a program independently before this. The SAYWLM project enabled me to start something from the beginning, build on my foundational knowledge on the core concepts, take positions on various issues, adopt listening practices and then put forth my own opinion. My confidence level, understanding, capacity to assert and bring my own voice to the fore, have all grown.

Mentoring is, in my understanding, grooming someone to be strong on their path with some objective — stated or unstated. My plan was to eliminate caste-based discrimination from society. My focus was only on the discriminated and most marginalized communities, to raise their awareness and enable them to bring

changes in their lives through knowledge and capacity. I discussed this with the Mentors. They took me to the depth of my issue, raising many questions about my plan, going into it layer by layer. Their pattern of constantly putting forth new questions opened my mind. I realized that it is necessary to find the root causes of discrimination and that only raising awareness among the most marginalized communities will not solve society's deeply rooted structured practices. The more privileged people, too, are equally responsible for the evil practices and the status of the marginalized. And so, I must also work with them, bring a sense of togetherness and create harmony. All this became possible due to mentoring.

Mentoring supports the building of young women's leadership. Leadership is a quality that develops in an open environment with education, exposure and freedom. It is related to geography, class, caste, gender-based opportunity provided by the family and the state. But not everyone has access to all of these. In this context, mentoring is important as it encourages, boosts confidence and capacity, and also provides a platform through which one can demonstrate outwardly what they have within them.

Peer mentoring

Peer mentoring or group mentoring helps us increase our confidence level to speak and express views in groups. Peer learning brings a sense of togetherness and is a participatory learning method that equips us to work towards common issues. A clearer understanding of social issues emerges, while the sharing of experiences helps build motivation and enables us to learn from each other. I developed a habit of taking decisions independently and tackling difficulties with my own understanding, without seeking support.

The whole mentoring process of three years made me see that I have an individual identity; I can do something in life to be independent and therefore I can feel proud of myself. The complete mentoring process has empowered and strengthened me to raise my voice against not just caste discrimination, but other human injustices. One of the significant points is that my foundation of thinking too has changed, now armed with strong interpretation and a depth of knowledge on women's rights issues. I became quite clear that patriarchy, as a system, is the root of all evils in society. It [mentoring] has encouraged me to pave the way forward strongly and

understand issues and individuals deeply.

Following this change, I conducted independent research on the status of Dalit representatives in one of the municipalities. Consequently, I received my first fellowship award from an international organization. In this way, mentoring through the YWL program has given me recognition in the district, community and among human rights organizations.

The CYWLs set in place community-led solutions

The CYWLs started tackling socially unacceptable incidents through administrative and legal processes.

A young woman in the community had died by suicide due to a domestic conflict. No one wanted to enter her room or speak up about this incident. No one wanted to register a police complaint, or intervene in what seemed like a family problem. Even when one of the neighbors eventually tried to lodge a police complaint, the police refused to register it. At this point, one of the CYWLs living nearby called the other CYWLs and together they opened the deceased woman's door, took photographs and marched to the police station. The police finally lodged the case. After this incident, the CYWLs have been approached many times by the local community to intervene in cases of domestic violence, cases of untouchability, and cases perceived to be related to witchcraft, etc. The municipality and NGOs have also roped in the CYWLs to offer them jobs, invite them to conduct sessions on human rights, or take part in the ongoing campaigns. I feel very proud that they are my CYWLs.

ALIYA

I had only recently joined my organization and was assigned to the SAYWLM project. The project attracted me. I wanted to know more about feminism, storytelling, etc. I had some idea about what leadership meant from my past experience of leading various processes, but my leadership style was different. I knew that one should protest if there were any rights violations but I did not know how and I did not have the tools to do it. I was also not aware of how to become a Mentor to others. It was through the mentoring process that I learned how one can lead by mentoring the team. I learned new terms and new ways in which to conduct myself.

I had the opportunity of engaging with three Mentors who were very helpful. When they spoke I would listen very closely since I was hesitant when speaking in English. It taught me to listen.

Building courage: as a survivor, as a young woman leader

I used to feel helpless and defeated quite often and would let go easily. It is due to the mentoring process that my patience, confidence and courage increased.

I am an acid attack survivor and because of the physical hurt I experienced in the attack I used to feel very scared. I used to think nothing is possible and that I will not be able to complete things on time. But, the Mentors helped build my courage and think positively. Now I feel that I will be able to do it and I don't let go of things easily. I used to get angry easily, a weakness of mine. But, the Mentors encouraged me to be patient. Now government representatives and other stakeholders like lawyers acknowledge me. Earlier nobody used to take me seriously since I was not very articulate and not able to express my views. My courage and self-confidence have increased.

The COVID-19 pandemic has had an impact on me, professionally and personally. During this time, my movement has been restricted and I have not been to the office for the past few months. I went into a state of depression wondering can one live like this? Then later I started thinking that such thoughts are not good. There are others who are dependent on me. My life is not mine alone. My country deserves something from me and it is because of this reason that I have to live. I tried to be

more positive and started interacting with my other colleagues. After the festival of Eid (Islamic religious festival) I requested permission and went to the office a few times and completed my work successfully. This process increased my patience. I believe that maybe one day the sun will rise again and that day we will all be able to laugh to our heart's content!

Mentoring of three years, still not enough

I have learned to listen, hear and share personal experiences — which will likely lead to others sharing their stories. Mentors have to be listeners. Only then will the Mentee come to you. I have become friendlier with the CYWLs [as their Mentor] which has resulted in them sharing their most personal feelings and thoughts with me.

Mentoring is an opportunity required for all. If there is good guidance then it will help a lot. I feel proud that in one year I was able to meet so many amazing people through the mentorship program. I feel lucky.

Making confident choices

The [mentoring] process helped make a leader out of someone who knew nothing about leadership. The SAYWLM project was ending in April 2020 and I applied for a job elsewhere, and even got selected and offered a better salary. However, the head of my organization told me that he did not want to lose a good employee like me. He said they couldn't match the salary being offered but still wanted me to stay. I knew that I would face difficulties on the low salary, but because of his attitude towards me and professional appreciation of my work, I decided not to leave the organization.

SAMYA

A mentoring process to recognize strengths

I always felt that Mentors would “show the way” to others, give directions. Only gradually did I realize that the mentoring process in fact, entailed understanding my own strengths and working on my personal weaknesses. This process helped me gain a lot of confidence. I was a shy person, always unsure of things I said, but the mentorship process helped me feel confident to share my opinion. In five years of working in this field, I had never felt this way.

Prior to these two years of my mentoring experience, I also felt I always understood issues at the surface level, but now I have learned to analyze the issues more deeply and critically. Now when I recall the conversations that took place over the one-on-one meetings and group mentoring calls, I feel all of those sessions have prepared us to act as powerful young women leaders.

There is no one call that I can specifically point to because I feel a lot of those calls helped me and added various perspectives to my learning. But, I would want to talk about this one particular conversation that occurred during the refresher training. I was new and the rest of the YWLs had already been with the project for a year. I was very nervous and I kept to myself. Then I met this Mentor and I was very scared and nervous at that time. Through one of our conversations, she calmed me down and told me that I just have to do whatever I can to the best of my abilities. Further, my Mentors and fellow YWLs supported me in completing all the tasks that we were assigned to during the training. This helped me ease into the project.

Recognizing the leader within

The negative pattern in my personal approach before this was due to my lack of confidence and shyness. I could not speak in front of people, I was an introvert. I did not contribute to many conversations. At any conferences, or meetings that I went to, I would usually sit in a corner, without uttering a single word. At the beginning I was only working as a program associate. I did not have any decision making power and limited myself to the assignments allocated by the senior staff members.

When I started the sessions with the Mentors, they encouraged me to share my ideas and opinions and I gradually saw myself opening up. We used to share challenges, issues and progress made during the one-on-one calls as well as group calls. Gradually this practice helped end that negative pattern. Now I feel I can present my opinions in front of others without wondering if it is right or wrong and I can ask questions to clarify my doubts. My ability to listen to others too has also improved. I could never fully pay attention to what anyone else was saying, but after the one-on-one and group mentoring sessions, this too also has changed. I began to understand my role as a YWL, started looking at myself differently and engaging better with my CYWLs. As I moved ahead in my initiative, the collective grew stronger, discussions intensified and I started seeing the leader in me.

Following this, my organization also started noticing me and recognizing my decisiveness. I received letters of appreciation which was a huge encouragement. The CYWLs and I started getting recognition not only for ourselves within the organization space, but also for our work within the community.

The support we received from the Mentors, we had never received within our own organizations. Within organizations you feel invisible, they do not consider young people's ideas worthy of their time. The confidence that the Mentors gave us made me feel that my ideas had some merit to them. The Mentors made us question all our decisions at critical junctures and made us develop a well thought out and critically analyzed plan. In my opinion this is always the starting point for taking up leadership roles. The deep thought processes activated through this initiative [SAYWLM] have continued throughout my journey. Furthermore, learning from each other in the group of YWLs also helped tremendously. We learned who to ask for support and whose help to seek to move forward with our movement building.

Focusing on the larger 'impact' of movements

In the beginning, I was limited in my approach. I saw completing the scheduled activities as my only responsibility. After attending the training workshop, I started understanding the concept of movement building and recognizing it as the primary focus of my action plan. I also started seeing the importance of movements. The earlier action plan did not include any activities or trainings for CYWLs. Mentors supported me in revising the plans and strategies, and I created a plan that was

owned then, by me and my CYWLs, and not my organization. It made us realize that this work is moving forward with our zeal and our ideas. This created a sense of belonging to the program. During our conversations, we would always try placing our initiatives in the larger women's movement space in the country.

Had it not been for the mentoring process, we would have stuck to simply completing activities. If after a session I would come back and tell my Mentors that I conducted a session with 300 people today, they would appreciate it not solely based on numbers. They would probe and ask me to place that activity in my larger movement space and define the intricacies and objectives. The Mentors repeatedly told us to not focus on activities but rather on impact and outcomes. This almost became an ingrained formula.

Group mentoring: the process and space

I felt really good about the group mentoring process from the very beginning. Initially I used to be conscious of what I was saying but gradually it felt like I was talking to an inner self. This was a platform where we could share all our experiences and discuss taking our feminist movements forward. This cross learning was very helpful in the overall process. The gravity of the issues, the strategies used, as shared by the nine YWLs, would always add a lot to the knowledge pool of the tenth one. It was a safe space. Usually people feel uncomfortable sharing personal issues but we felt very comfortable sharing with each other. There were things that I had not shared with my family, but I shared here. The most important thing I learned through the group mentoring process was self care. We supported each other. Meeting everyone, whenever it was possible, felt really good.

These group meetings actually acted as a source of power for all the ten YWLs. I never felt that I was alone. I always saw ten young women in this process together trying to bring in their different forms of activism and work on feminist movement building with each other. I never felt unhealthy competition among us and we were always very supportive of each other. Without this group my work with LGBTQI persons would have remained my isolated effort, but through this group it became the effort of not one but ten YWLs together. Similarly, I reciprocated for their initiatives with Dalit women, sexual violence and several others. Hence, group mentoring has supported to integrate at least ten issues of feminist movements in our country. Now

all of us are familiar with these issues of women's rights, and we can talk about it wherever needed and work on them with a concerted effort.

Understanding power

When I started this project, I was just a student who had volunteered with the organization. Then I got the opportunity to work as a YWL, which was very gradual and organic change. I saw changes in myself due to my Mentors. I then realized it was my responsibility to give the same opportunities to my CYWLs, to help them realize these changes in them. So I also became a Mentor from just being a Mentee. Now I see myself as a leader, which was beyond imagination [for me] the college student who joined this project two years ago.

The most important change that I see in myself is the way I look at power dynamics. I realized that for any movement to move forward, I cannot decide things by myself. People should be given the agency to make decisions for themselves. Using only my head, I can only think so far — but with so many brains working on one problem, new ideas, innovative strategies, etc., would come up.

This power distribution is the most important aspect of leadership. Everyone comes with their own set of different ideas that can prove very helpful in different situations. The ideas are unique even when they come from people younger to you. Understanding this and not continuing as a leader who feels she knows it all is what I have learned from my Mentors.

To first change the personal

I have actually understood what it means to change yourself first before changing things outside. Earlier I was the unnoticed student in my college; no teacher recognized me. But, the teachers have since seen me grow. They appreciate me for my work, and I have started speaking up in class.

I also discuss what I learn about patriarchy and discrimination with my husband. These were matters that he never noticed or thought about before. But now he understands that these issues are relevant. When my Mentors initially tried asking me questions related to my personal space and my family, I used to feel awkward. But

gradually I realized why it is important to get a comprehensive picture of the Mentee to understand their anxieties, deal with their issues and help them realize their full potential. For all this to happen, the personal front cannot be ignored or put in silos. I do feel this has been a challenging task and a good learning experience for me to understand how to react to my CYWLs and what conversations to have with them.

The SAYWLM journey

A mentoring process is very important for young women like me. A major part of this process is exploring inner capacities and not imposing or coercing a young leader to accept life as it is. All the positive qualities can be enhanced and negative patterns dealt with through an extensive process like this. Generating a sense of belonging is the most important aspect for a movement building process and through SAYWLM, that is what we young women learned. I am really thankful to SAYWLM for giving me the opportunity to be a part of this journey and explore such different sides of myself. And through the SAYWLM initiative, I have been able to find my capabilities to work on feminism and implement its principles on the ground.

RUBINA

“Although it is a three year process, a longer time-frame will help create a greater connection between Mentors and Mentees.”

The mentoring process is a space for inspiration

I am fortunate to have benefited from four Mentors. I have learned new things from them, been inspired by each one of them and I got in touch with my Power Within, and also benefited from their depth of experience. The mentoring process has changed my life a lot. The Mentors helped me gain a lot of Power Within which I can now connect to my increase in confidence. The mentoring process is about human growth. I had no knowledge about mentoring and initially felt that this process might be about outcomes, updates and the way forward in projects. But after going through this process I understood that this was about much more. The mentoring process is a space for inspiration, learning, experiencing and building one’s mental strength. Earlier I used to stay distracted and worried. Now I have found myself. Now I can strongly say where I want to go. Each and every session was very useful, important and helped me professionally and personally.

Learning to practice leadership

I knew about leadership and had some ideas about it. But, I felt I never had the practice and never thought of myself as a leader.

I had some negative experiences in my personal life and was not sure about what it meant to be a feminist activist. At a very basic level in my personal life, it was about who does what at home. I used to think that even the smallest of household chores was a woman’s duty, for example, washing clothes was a woman’s responsibility. Why will men do this work? I never questioned this. When I interacted with the Mentors and got involved in the program, I understood gender very clearly. I had

never fully explored the issue of sexuality and had never understood or approved of same-sex relationships. Now at this point I feel that life choices are every person's right. I should not be a judge of this. I am now clear about the gender socialization process and how socialization must be questioned.

Because of my interaction with the Mentors I feel I can now practice leadership — it is more rights based and I uphold that. And that is helping me practice my leadership even at the personal level. I now do not take for granted all that I do in my personal life or say things out of social pressure, because I believe differently now. My inner conscience pushes me to question these concepts in life. It is from my Mentors that I learned how to internalize leadership. Now I am able to think of much more positive thoughts.

Understanding the use and misuse of power

The second significant change has been the understanding about a leader's attitude and changing my attitude as a leader. I now understand power and the misuse of power. I have understood that leadership is not just what you do, but about when you speak and how you conduct yourself in different spaces. It is those spaces where you practice your leadership. It is through this program that I now have more power. But I am very conscious about the opportunities that I have received and that I should not misuse this power. If I have more opportunity and more power, I will ensure that I don't misuse the power when interacting with family and community. This understanding has been from the mentoring process which has impacted my personal and professional life.

Positive changes for a Mentee at the professional level

At the organizational level, a couple of things have changed in these past three years, and this was because of my leadership. My confidence and knowledge about issues have increased. Now my concerns are addressed, my opinion is taken and asked for in the organization. My position has also improved, and I am now a senior member of the organization. Before this program, when I was working, any time the organization considered giving me any responsibility, I used to be apprehensive of whether I will be able to deliver or lead the process. I used to question myself. Going out alone on

organizational work was a huge issue. I was not confident in undertaking external interface activities. Someone needed to accompany me since I was a “woman.” But now I am leading programs. Now I feel that I can do the work alone.

Even though the [SAYWLM] program came to an end in March 2020, that did not stop my own growth within my organization; I have been given a new program to lead and have become an organizational signatory to the project. This is a huge win and a significant achievement for me. It is difficult to express the feeling and all the positive changes. This is such a beautiful thing that has happened to me and I feel that this mentoring process should have come [into my life] five years earlier.

Connecting with the Mentor and the CYWLs

Mentors have helped in many ways in the movement building process. [In movement building] I undertook the following steps. First, I involved the CYWLs. They were part of everything. They were community leaders and I was with them. Before identifying the issue, I talked to the community, who helped identify the issue. Next, I spoke to the women [in the community] and they shared their issues. Overall a lot of issues came up. I felt that I should not be the one to decide the issue that the movement would be centered around. So, I went back to the CYWLs and the community. They, along with me, jointly identified the issue that we would work on – the property rights of women. This had the potential to become a movement, since it was not just about women’s property rights, but also linked to the issues of power, and human rights.

We sensitized the community around the issue, discussed what property rights meant and how it can give agency and entitlement to women. The CYWLs and I took it upon us to reach out to institutional stakeholders: local and national government and even parliamentarians. The strategies that we developed needed a lot of buy-in from these institutions. CYWLs accompanied me to the stakeholders. All these processes were jointly done. The Mentors taught me movement related planning. After the mentoring process I used to go back, modify the plan, sit with the plan, discuss with the CWYLs. That is the type of connectedness that I had developed with the CYWLs and also with the Mentors.

I am a Mentor

I feel so great hearing that I am a Mentor! My Mentors still inspire me. I use the same methods that my Mentors used to speak to me and different ones, since my CYWLs are grassroots workers. My CYWLs do not ask the same questions as I asked my Mentors. Therefore, I consciously do not use the same processes but rather tailor my responses to her [the CYWLs] issues. I use the space to learn, discuss and find ways — this is what my Mentors taught me. My expectation is that hopefully we can be in touch with each other outside of this process.





The SAYWLM Initiative

The South Asia Young Women’s Leadership and Mentoring (SAYWLM) initiative was launched in 2017 with a unique model of feminist mentoring to support a new generation of feminist leaders who are transforming their organizations and communities. The initiative was co-designed by CREA and Global Fund for Women, and coordinated by CREA from 2017 – 2020.

This guide is a result of collectively building knowledge from practice during this initiative, and evolved with the energy and commitment of multiple actors involved in the SAYWLM program.

Global Fund for Women

Global Fund for Women envisions a world in which movements for gender justice have transformed power and privilege for a few into equity and equality for all.

As a feminist fund, Global Fund for Women offers flexible support to a diverse group of partners — more than 5,000 groups across 175 countries so far — to create meaningful change that will last beyond our lifetimes. To learn more, visit www.globalfundforwomen.org.

Founded in 2000, CREA is a feminist human rights organization based in New Delhi, India. It is one of the few international women's rights organizations based in the global South and led by Southern feminists, which works at the grassroots, national, regional, and international levels.

CREA envisions a more just and peaceful world, where everyone lives with dignity, respect and equality. CREA builds feminist leadership, advances women's human rights, and expands sexual and reproductive freedoms for all people.



Illustration on back cover:

Five people are around a bonfire. The bonfire is pink with yellow-orange lines to indicate flames. The people are in shades of pink, dressed in purple and yellow clothing, and have purple hair with yellow shaded or yellow patterns drawn in. Some are warming themselves with their palms held up against the fire, while another has a hand cupped under the chin. The group is drawn against a background of purple mountains and a dark blue sky. Flecks of embers from the bonfire dot the sky and air around them.



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