

Feminist Mentoring: An Approach to Personal and Political Change

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Abstract

Most mentoring theory and practice centres around helping individuals change in the context of working in organizations. The hidden assumption is that organizations are immutable: it's the individuals who change.

Feminist mentoring, in contrast, is part of a larger process of transforming society. It works to help those who are mentored to recognize gender-based (and other) injustices in social structures such as families, organizations, and communities, and develop capacity to be part of a process of challenge and change, including changing oneself. It promotes analysis of one's own leadership practices and relationship to power; and a commitment to change negative patterns that reproduce dominant forms of oppressive power. Thus, feminist mentoring is not instrumental in creating people more 'adjusted' for organizational work; its purpose is to create feminist leaders who will challenge inequitable structures, systems and institutions.

The feminist mentoring approach adapts the Edgar H. Schein's approach of Process consultation and then builds on mentoring principles developed by feminist scholars.

This paper describes the experience of applying feminist mentoring theory and practice in the South Asian context in a program that focused on 30 young women leaders in 3 countries.

Considering this is the first such regional initiative in mentoring grassroots women leaders, preliminary evidence suggests the process is succeeding.

Introduction

The theory and practice of mentoring has been considerably developed over the past. It is surprising, therefore, to find very little thinking or theorization of feminist mentoring. This is a critical gap, especially given the global focus on increasing women's representation in leadership in the public, private, and civil society sectors, and growing investment in leadership capacity building. Fortunately, we now have material that integrates basic mentorship models with feminist mentoring principles – specifically, the ideas of feminist mentoring by Pam Remer and Srilatha Batliwala, and ideas related to consultation by Edgar Schein.

In the developing world, organizations like CREA (Creating Resources for Empowerment in Action) have, since their inception, focused on building young feminist leadership, not only to deal with the “aging out” of older feminist leaders in the women's movement, but also to ensure its sustainability and resilience. This was done mainly through training programmes, which gradually revealed that training alone cannot build leadership without sustained, empowering mentoring to support young leaders (and older ones, for that matter), over time.

With this realization, CREA, in partnership with the Global Fund for Women, designed the SAYWLM (South Asia Young Women's Leadership and Mentoring) initiative in 2016. The project design attempts to address four critical gaps affecting the sustainability and resilience of the women's movement in this region (and in fact, more globally), viz., the lack of conscious strategies for building young women's leadership, the lack of structured support and mentoring of young women leaders, “projectization” and lack of movement-building approaches, and the need to nurture feminist leadership practices (as opposed to mainstream male leadership models) among a new generation of women's movement leaders.

The initiative was launched in Bangladesh, India and Nepal in early 2017 in partnership with ten women's rights organizations in each country. Each identified one young woman leader (YWL) who would be mentored individually and collectively by a team of three feminist mentors in each country. Each YWL is in turn building the leadership of at least ten other young women in the communities where she works, through a process of building a movement to address a critical issue affecting women and girls. An initial training for the nine mentors was held in May 2017, followed by a training for 30 YWLs in July 2017. From September 2017 onwards, the YWLs have been mentored through monthly one-on-one and group mentoring sessions – both virtual and face-to-face – by the 3 mentors in each country. Thus far, an average of 12 individual mentoring sessions have been conducted, and at least 10 group sessions, in each country.

The Need for Feminist Mentoring

Feminist mentoring has a distinct purpose - to deepen awareness of how gender/ other social injustices affect our functioning in all our private and public roles; to challenge the socio-political-economic-historical-cultural systems and institutions that uphold these. The willingness to challenge others and one's own belief system that normalize and perpetuate these; and lastly, to mobilize others to work for equity and gender justice.

Thus, feminist mentoring goes beyond the boundaries of conventional mentoring in recognizing the multiple spaces in which young women activists must tackle gender-based injustices - in social structures such as families and personal lives, in their organizations, and in their communities and societies at large. Feminist mentoring supports mentees to identify challenges – which are often invisible because they have been “normalised” and internalised – and negotiate change in spaces beyond the traditional confines of their jobs / organizations. It is about fostering a deep personal commitment, among the mentors as well as, those who are mentored to being part of such a process of challenge and change, including changing oneself; willingness to analyse one's own concept of leadership and relationship to power, and how one practices power. Most of all, feminist mentoring seeks to transform the negative patterns and practices that reproduce dominant forms of oppressive power associated with mainstream leadership (especially recognising one's own “powerless rage” and “power under”ⁱ practices Wineman 2003) to create genuinely feminist leadership practice that will more effectively mobilize others in the change process.

I. Characteristics of Feminist Mentoring

- ***It makes visible and builds understanding of how gender has impacted the realization of full human potential.*** It also uses concepts of social change and marginalization to help the mentee contextualize the personal challenge she is facing to effective change institutions she is working in.
- ***Collaborative and mutually enhancing;*** The mentee is seen as bringing her own knowledge, lived experience, and insights to the process, though the mentor's expertise is clearly needed to consolidate that knowledge and experience or apply it in new ways. (This is the same as building on the resources of the individual. The expertise brought in by the mentor is that of the external catalyst.)
- ***Is holistic and encompasses “... all the major dimensions of women's lives.”*** Not just professional, but also personal.
- ***Recognizes the intersecting facets of women's identities***
- It works with the principle and practice of power equalization.

- Involves “*mutual caring and emotional support*”- including of mentors themselves. (Implies that the mentee too can be the mentor)
- Feminist mentors and mentees embark on *a shared journey* of exploration, action, and change.
- Feminist mentorship is *a multi-faceted, multi-person, circular process*, and not necessarily one-to-one or vertical.
- *Feminist mentorship requires organizations to dedicate and protect space and time, people and resources* for mentoring. Mentorship processes shouldn't be seen as unaffordable luxuries but necessary to the development of feminist leaders, organizations, and movements.

II. The Objectives of Feminist Mentoring

The purpose of feminist mentoring is not simply to help the ‘mentees who are feminist activists’ succeed in her chosen role / job / organization / career path / life goals, but to create *transformative leaders* who will inspire and mobilize others to challenge and dismantle oppressive and discriminatory social structures and norms. Its key goals could be summarised as:

- Intellectually and emotionally capacitating and supporting feminist activists who are leading change processes with a feminist vision of social justice.
- Identifying the challenges facing feminist activists she tries to work constructively for self, organizational and societal change and empowerment - in a feminist framework.
- Helping feminist activists to generate, develop and apply the necessary resources for such social change.

III. Before Starting the Mentoring Process

Before starting the mentoring process, the mentor needs to be clear about her broad approach to mentoring - she needs to choose a model of mentoring and prepare herself for the mentoring process.

The choice is fairly simple: choose between the models of Expert, Doctor and the Process based help one. As is probably well known, in the Expert model, the Mentee identifies the specific problem, and asks the mentor to give advice. Being one that allows for quick fixes, this model also tends to be most frequently used.

In the Doctor Model the mentee hands over the responsibility of finding out the root problem to the mentor, in whose hands also rests the responsibility of finding the solution to the problem. Again, as is probably well known, the Doctor model carries the risk of the mentee resenting the advice giver, the Doctor!

The third model, the Process based one, with its focus on power equality, lends itself to the feminist mentoring approach. Here the process of diagnosis and finding solutions is a collaborative one - the diagnostic skills of the mentor are also passed on to the mentee.

With the chosen model, the mentee also prepares to create a container for the session. This container implies an environment of trust, non-judgment and openness. To create this container, the mentor needs to look into herself and identify her own biases and reactions. If the mentee says something that is entirely different from the mentor's values and principles, how will she respond? In case the response is candid, but also critical, there is always a possibility that the mentee would feel judged, and either clamp up, or respond with hostility. In either case, the mentor's ability to help the mentee understand and deal constructively with the challenges, would get impacted.

Further, (and as the section on psychodynamics also details), the mentor also needs to look at her own drives and needs. Does she, for instance, have a very strong need to win approval? Or does she have a need to have the last word in a session?

IV. Detailing the Sessions and the Mentoring Relationship

To begin mentoring, the mentor needs to navigate a process of building a relationship in which power is not vested with the mentor. The development of this relationship can be divided into three distinct phases: a phase of pure enquiry, a phase of exploratory diagnostic enquiry, and a phase of confrontative enquiry. It is somewhere during the first two stages that the relationship may reach a critical stage: that of power equalization. From this stage onwards, the mentee does not in any way feel inferior to the mentor.

A key aspect of the mentoring process is the use of hypothesis 'in exploring the problems or issues brought up by the mentee.'

The hypotheses are generated using theories of organizational, social and personal change. It is up to the mentee to accept these hypotheses, and then use these hypotheses to reflect on what she needs to change in herself: her perspectives, attitudes, assumptions or world view.

A. Phases and stages of the Mentor-Mentee Relationship

As indicated above, there are 3 phases of the relationship between the mentor and mentee, all based on the kind of Inquiry done by the mentor: Pure Inquiry / Exploratory, Diagnostic or Confrontative.

In the Pure Inquiry phase, the mentee controls both the process and the content of the conversation. Here, the mentee talks unfettered, at her own pace, and about whatever she wants to talk about. The mentor interrupts only to ask clarificatory questions: what happened, describe the situation, tell me more, etc.; or to summarize her understanding of what the mentee has said.

In the Exploratory Diagnostic Inquiry phase, the mentor begins to control the process of how the content is to be analyzed. She starts asking questions that get the mentee to reflect a bit about what she has been asking. The mentor may explore emotional responses (How did you and/or the others feel or react to the situation?), hypotheses for actions and events that took place (Why did you or the others do something? Why do you think that happened? You or the others did something as a result of which this happened. What did you do?), and the Past, Present and Future result of Actions taken or contemplated (What are the options open to you?). This phase usually happens after the mentee has already spoken to her satisfaction describing the situation and problem she is facing. In this phase, the mentor only asks questions about what she has already talked about.

Finally, in the Confrontative Inquiry phase, the mentor shares her own ideas and reactions about the process and content of the story. She deliberately chooses to focus on issues that have not been brought up by the mentee! This forces the mentee to think from an alternative perspective. Here the mentor can share reactions related to the Process (Could you have done the following?) or the Content (Have you considered the possibility that your reaction was due to your envying the Supervisor?). Alternatively, the mentor brings up contradictions she has noted in what the mentee talked about. (e.g., she expected her Supervisor to be sensitive to her needs, while she herself had not shown sensitivity towards the Supervisor.)

Needless to say, this is the toughest phase, as the mentee can get upset with the mentor for not being empathetic. However, if the mentee is able to take the questions in a spirit of exploration, these questions have the potential for mentee to generate the maximum amount of insights about herself and her context. Nonetheless, the mentor has to be very careful before starting

Confrontative Inquiry: She needs to be sure that the relationship between her and the mentee is truly equal, and the mentee considers the mentor a trusted partner in this exploration. Thus, the mentor should only get into this phase after both of them have reached a stage of power equalization and acceptance of the other - in which the mentee is sure that the questions that are coming to her are not coming with any intent to put her down.

The use of Hypothesis during Confrontative Inquiry

The potential of the mentor-mentee relationship to be helpful to the mentee stems from the quality of the hypotheses generated about the mentee, the organization or movement the mentee is involved in, and the Society or Community in which the mentee is based. The hypotheses refer to a set of connected reasons that can explain how a situation came about. This hypothesis can be generated by the mentor or the mentee and it helps if there is more than one hypothesis to explain a situation.

A. Being aware of Psychodynamics and Cultural Context

In the way the terms mentor and mentee are generally understood, there is a widely shared perception that the mentor is in some ways superior to the mentee. Thus, mentor and mentee are already in an unequal relationship. This is further complicated by the cultural context of regions like South Asia, in which the SAYWLM project's mentoring took place. A long history of social hierarchies (based on age, gender, caste, class, ethnicity, religion, education, urban-rural, etc.) and internalized social norms around respect, deference and the "guru-shishya" tradition set up a range of unarticulated but very real expectations that intervene in the mentoring process, and further confound the practice of feminist mentorship principles.

This imbalance and socio-cultural baggage can create a range of feelings and responses in the mentor and mentee. Some of these include:

- ***Deference***: The mentee – consciously or as a result of social conditioning – distances the mentor through deferential behavior – ‘You are the learned / superior one; everything you say must be true, or at least, I need to act deferentially to please you.’ Some degree of manipulation is also at play here, since mentors in turn may unconsciously respond to the deference in ways that skew the imbalance further.
- ***Dependency / helplessness***: Feeling helpless and entirely dependent on the support of the mentor, and even anger and disappointment if the mentor does not accept the dependency. (You are the learned / experienced one, the ‘guru’ – you should tell me how to solve my problems / what to do. If you don't, you are letting me down.)

- ***Resentment and defensiveness:*** The mentee may sub-consciously start looking for opportunities to make the mentor appear incompetent.
- ***A Mixture of Relief*** - at having shared a problem - and a frustration with one-self for being incapable of having solved the problem on her own.
- ***Transference:*** considering the mentor to be friendly or unfriendly because of the similarity with some other individual in the mentee's past.
- ***Counter-Transference:*** The mentor considering the mentee to be pliable or otherwise, because of the similarity with some other individual in the Mentor's past.

The different feelings created in the self of the mentee - that of resentment, comfort, or relief, can in turn seduce the mentor into accepting the higher status being offered by the mentee. This is even more challenging in the feminist mentoring context, where both mentor and mentee have been conditioned in a deeply problematic social and patriarchal context of specific gendered roles for women – for example, for women to reproduce familial roles in all their interactions (mother-daughter, sister-sister, mother-in-law daughter-in-law, etc.) and for women of different ages, class-caste status to relate in particular ways, including patronage, deference, manipulation.

Thus, once the mentor accepts that higher status, the mentor, in turn may start doing some or all of the following things:

- Dispensing pre-mature wisdom or even complete solutions / strategies to the mentee.
- Providing support and re-assurance to the mentee even when it is not required.
- “Mothering” or “Sintering” the mentee, wanting to be there for them at all times even if it breeds further dependency.
- Responding to the defensiveness of the mentee by applying even greater pressure.

Psychodynamics can also be presented diagrammatically as in Figure 1

The Psychodynamics of Mentoring

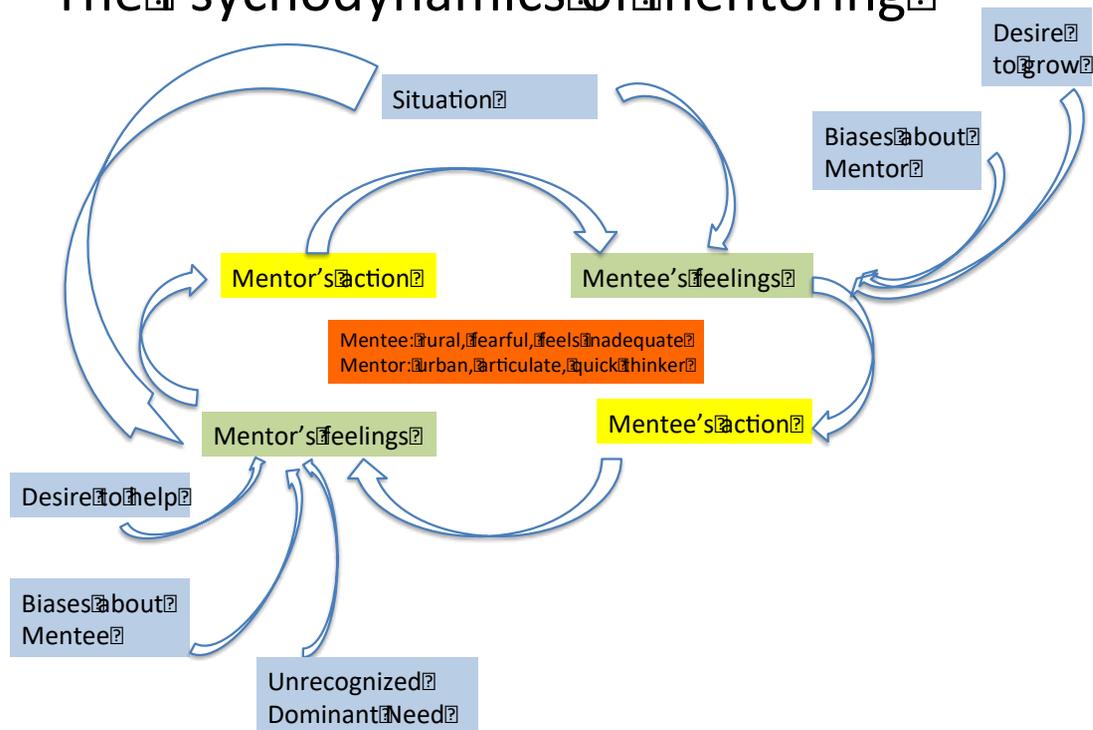


Figure 1 The Psychodynamics of Mentoring

An Example

Figure 1 presents an example of the psycho-dynamics between a mentor and a mentee.

- The mentee has a rural background, and limited exposure to city people. The mentor is educated and has a city background.
- The mentee feels awed by the mentor. She is afraid of making a statement that would be considered ‘foolish’ and she also fears that the mentor knows her seniors. Consequently, the mentee speaks slowly, and keeps quiet the moment she hears the mentor speaking. She also agrees quickly to whatever the mentor suggests.
- The mentor probably comes in with a bias that the mentee, because of her background, is likely to be unaware of things around her. She will be a doer, rather than a thinker; and, be compliant to tough and shrewd people.
- When she finds that the mentee is speaking slowly, and saying she has no problems in her work, the mentor becomes impatient, and talks about how everybody faces a problem.
- Feeling pressurized, the mentee presents a minor problem which she has, actually resolved. The problem presented is that of getting delayed at work. These delays result in reaching home late, and getting lectured by her family.

- The mentor thinks that she has understood the problem, and starts exploring the situation with the mentee. She asks the mentee about her parents, and her Supervisor.
- She advises the mentee to negotiate with her Supervisor about her work timings. The mentee says that her supervisor depends on her work more than others and hence the delay. The mentor - convinced, (at the mentee's soft behavior with her) that the mentee is a 'nice' push over, says with slight irritation, that she should not be so nice, and like a proper feminist activist, fight for her rights.
- At which the mentee judging that enough has been said, says, "Okay Didi, I will try."
- This convinces the mentor further, that the mentee is a soft pushover, who can be taken for granted. Consequently, in subsequent sessions, the mentor spends a fruitless time trying to understand why is it that the mentee did not 'stand up for her rights' vis-à-vis the Supervisor!

Comments on the Example

In the above example, we see how the bias of the mentor interfered with the feedback of the mentee to produce a situation in which the mentor is convinced that the mentee is an easy push over, who has to be taught how to stand up for her rights! On the other hand, the mentee is now convinced that the mentor will pressurize her; and is thankful that she has picked up a non-troublesome problem on which she can comfortably prevaricate and get through the sessions. The bias of the mentor has produced a self-fulfilling prophecy: she had expected the mentee to be a soft pushover, and now she is convinced that the mentee is one! Every session she has with the mentee tends to reinforce this bias.

In the given example, the effect of the bias can get worsened if the mentor lets her own deep drives and needs affect her behavior. If one of her needs is to be right in all situations, she will tend not to hear any disagreement. If the mentee now says that her supervisor is actually very supportive, the mentor may ignore that, because she is convinced that the problems of the mentee stems from the fact that she is not assertive enough!

The effect of the bias - and the consequent self-fulfilling prophecy can be countered, provided the mentor is aware both of her own bias and her deep-seated needs to be proven right every time. If she is aware, she will not rush ahead in her questioning and concluding. When the mentee says that her problem is getting delayed at work, the mentor might then say, "I hear you say that is your biggest or only problem. Is this true?" This might give the opportunity to the mentee to say, "Well, not really".

Alternatively, if the mentor has followed the approach of the Pure Inquiry and Appreciative Inquiry scrupulously, and she had patiently heard the mentee, she might have come across statements by the mentee that start contradicting each other. Situations such as these might allow the mentor to check with the mentee whether the problem she is indicating is indeed the biggest problem.

Hypotheses Grounded in Theories of Person, Organization, Societal Change

All mentoring processes have an underlying theory about how change takes place. As most mentoring texts are situated in the context of managing organizations - the change that mentoring texts refer to is individual change in the mentee. In conventional mentoring, there is yet another assumption: it is the individual who is expected to change in conformity with the organization's mission.

Feminist mentoring, however, does not assume that the organization is necessarily right, or that the individual must learn to adapt to the organization. On the contrary, it assumes that organizations (even feminist ones!), being part of the larger social reality, are sites where the power imbalances, and visible and hidden biases and norms of a patriarchal society are reproduced and must be challenged (Rao et al, 1999, Friedman and Meer 2017, Batliwala 2011). In short, if social transformation has to be brought about, it cannot only be at the level of the individual – it must also address organizations and the larger society as sites of change. This in turn requires analytical tools to assess the nature of the challenges in these different sites, thinking about viable strategies for change within each, and anticipating and equipping mentees for dealing with the backlash that may result from trying to effect change.

A key part of the feminist mentoring process, therefore, is to help the mentee generate hypotheses to understand the challenges facing them, including theories that help in the understanding of behavior at different levels: person, organization and society.

Examples of person-centered theories include Erik Erikson's life stages. An understanding of life stages from a distinctly female perspective can be found in Marilyn Mason's "Making our Lives our Own". The latter is also, obviously, a person-centered theory that is more appropriate in the context of feminist mentoring.

Organization centered theories of change include the Edgar Schein theory of cultural change, the concept of Organizational Life Cycle, propounded by Dr Ichak Adizes, and the concept of Deep Change put forth by Batliwala.

Social theories of change include one that distinguishes Projectable change and Emergent change.

Finally, there are theories related to gender and feminist analysis. These include theories related to Power, and how patriarchal norms are embedded in social institutions and structures.

V. Conclusion

Looking Back

The one-year experience of the SAYLM project has taught us the following:

1. Feminist mentoring is an emergent theory and practice that needs much more experimentation and development. The feminist mentor will need to learn, unlearn, relearn through deep reflection, and have a sustained commitment to navigate the ethical boundaries of feminist principles and a gendered social justice framework, and build the leadership capacity of her mentees in their personal, organizational, and community contexts.
2. Feminist mentoring is a skill learnt through practice, which goes beyond merely offering help. It necessitates a structured, rather than demand-driven mentorship process.
3. It is purposive and requires equal commitment from both mentor and mentee in the shared journey towards the intended social justice goal. It is not mentoring for capacity/ skill building of the mentee alone, nor can it be sustained if both sides are not invested in the process.
4. It is important to acknowledge – and provide support for managing - the emotional demand on the mentors. A de-briefing form helps the mentors to reflect on the kind of mentoring practised, their emotions during the entire sessions, their opinions on the inputs from the mentee. Over time, this debriefing form will become an invaluable resource for the mentors' group and also help deepen the understanding of the complexities of feminist mentoring.
5. The process is heavily dependent on the mentor listening but waiting. The purpose of the mentoring is to enable/ capacitate the mentee to reach within herself and develop her own leadership capacity. This involves allowing the mentee the time and space to experiment and discover. As much as possible, it is not to be reduced to an exercise of problem solving.

Challenges Faced & the Way Ahead

As the SAYWLM project has progressed, several challenges have emerged.

1. The lack of familiarity with this model of mentoring, has raised the possibility that mentees and mentors will slip back into conventional mentoring roles of asking for advice and being provided possible solutions.
2. There is a possibility of creating a dysfunctional relationship of dependence. Building a feminist movement often involves creating a circle of sisterhood and solidarity where the group acknowledges the various hurdles that a deeply patriarchal and divisive society creates for us. This often assumes that there is tremendous amount of emotional support, encouragement, counseling and consoling already present. However, in the context of feminist mentoring, this poses two problems –
 - a) Mentors need to refrain from saying “everything will be all right/ we will all stand by you” and instead turn the spotlight on various analytical frameworks which can help the mentee re-think her situation;
 - b) These may often end up reinforcing traditional patriarchal familial roles where the mentor is seen as a caring, forgiving mother or an ever-helpful elder sister. Therefore, feminist mentoring needs to go beyond sisterhood and solidarity, and enable the mentee to develop her capacity to create the intended social transformation. The responsibility of staying within the mentoring framework and be willing to push back when the mentee takes on the role of a helpless sufferer lies on the mentor.
3. The mentors need to accept that they cannot give solutions/ advice and therefore not all problems or mentoring sessions will come to a beautiful closure. Further, the mentee may make choices that are different from what the mentor may have suggested.
4. There is a variation in the willingness of different mentees to open up and talk to the mentors. It may be easier if the mentorship is purely organizational with a focus on the mentees’ skill/ capacity development. The mentors have to be patient in allowing the relationship to develop and for the mentee to realize that this relationship provides a unique non-judgmental space where they can discuss all issues.
5. Even as the feminist principle of ‘The Personal is Political’ is valued, the principle of confidentiality must simultaneously be taken into consideration, since feminist mentoring must also create a safe space where the shame associated with the personal is removed and things are placed in a more systemic socio-political perspective. Helping mentees see the political in the personal is a vital task of a feminist mentor.
6. Bringing about social transformation is an ambitious goal. Mentorship provides a constant critical support mechanism for the mentees to try to unravel and tackle deep-seated discriminations. It is important to build consensus within the participating organizations so that other people around the mentee also provide support during this process.

The SAYWLM project is now in its second year, and will conclude in March 2020, by which time the YWLs would have received about two and a half years of feminist mentoring. There has already been some attrition among the YWLs – five of the original group have left their organizations, and been replaced by new YWLs. Their orientation and induction into the mentoring process has been less challenging than we anticipated, thanks largely to the group calls and peer mentoring.

Since the project is only midway, it is too early to assess impact. However, the recent round of refresher trainings (July and August 2018) held with the 10 YWLs in each country showed some positive initial effects of the project and of the mentoring process. For example, YWLs themselves conducted several of the training sessions, and their enhanced grasp of both concepts (power, patriarchy, feminism, feminist leadership, movement-building) as well as their overall confidence and articulation skill was in sharp contrast to a year earlier. Even their organizational leaders were struck by their growth, since it was the first time many of them got this comprehensive view of the YWLs' progress over the past year. The project coordinators and the mentors also witnessed how much more confidently the YWLs related to their “bosses” despite the hierarchy.

The quality of their relationship with the mentors – trust but not dependence – and their understanding that the mentors were there to support them on their journeys, not lead them, was repeatedly articulated by the YWLs in different ways. The vast majority recounted different ways in which they had grown, personally and professionally, but Bindu from Nepal put it most clearly:

“I am a different person from who I was a year ago. I got here because of the support of my mentors, and the clarity that these trainings have given me. The mentors have pushed me to think for myself, to find my own solutions, to become stronger, to realize I have the capacity within me to be a leader, a feminist leader. Because of this, I have found the courage to challenge even my family on their gender biases – and also to influence my organization to do things differently. I have begun to understand what it is to build a movement, not run a project. I know I can build the same confidence in my community leaders as well.”

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