

GENERATING SOLIDARITY THROUGH EVERYDAY PRACTICES

EXPERIENCES OF A RURAL WOMEN'S MOVEMENT IN INDIA

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ABSTRACT

The scholarship on everyday politics has largely focussed on forms of resistance, foregrounding a conception of political agency that is premised on the assumption of an autonomous consciousness of marginalized subjects. Distinct from accounts of organized collective action which focus on the articulation of shared interests and the achievement of particular outcomes, the central concern has been to establish political agency through actions and intentions of subaltern actors. In this thesis, I examine the experiences of a rural women's movement in the hill region of Uttarakhand in India, which emerged as a consequence of organizing primarily in the arena of everyday practices. I focus on the emergence of 'solidarity', as opposed to 'resistance', and on critical consciousness as a method of organizing, as opposed to an attribute of subaltern subjects, to highlight a relational conception of power and how it is experienced and challenged in particular forms. Based on interviews with movement leaders, activists and participants, and observations of their interactions in 2009, I reflect on why the focus on collective enactments of everyday practices opened up political spaces for women and shaped the conditions of possibility for social mobilizations on specific issues. Organizing strategies of activists emphasize thinking and working through practices, privileging women's experiences and everyday work and activities. I argue that such an approach illustrates how contingency is constitutive of the political. It shows that the process of forging an unstable solidarity premised on addressing conflicts through historically informed practices, which sometimes crystallises to achieve specific outcomes. The trajectory of the formation of this movement, thus, also illustrates how everyday politics and social mobilizations geared toward achieving specific outcomes draw on each other.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

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INTRODUCTION

The scholarship on everyday politics has largely focussed on forms of resistance, foregrounding a conception of political agency that is premised on the assumption of an autonomous consciousness of marginalized subjects (Scott, 1985; Scott & Kerkvliet, 1986; Ortner, 1995; Agrawal, 2005). Distinct from accounts of organized collective action which focus on the articulation of shared interests and the achievement of particular outcomes, the central concern has been to establish political agency through actions and intentions of subaltern actors. In this thesis, I examine the experiences of a rural women's movement in the hill region of Uttarakhand in India, which emerged as a consequence of organizing primarily in the arena of everyday practices. I focus on the emergence of 'solidarity', as opposed to 'resistance', and on critical consciousness as a method of organizing, as opposed to an attribute of subaltern subjects, to highlight a relational conception of power and how it is experienced and challenged in particular forms (Gramsci, 1971; Friere, 1973). The trajectory of the formation of this movement also illustrates how everyday politics and social mobilizations geared toward achieving specific outcomes draw on each other.

The Uttarakhand Environment Education Centre (UEEC), a small organisation with a core staff of approximately 10 people, has been working in the hill villages of Uttarakhand since the mid-1980s. Started primarily by educationists from the region, it was one of the many political organizations that emerged in India in the 1970s and the early 1980s, a period characterised by growing disillusionment with political parties and

institutional politics, particularly among educated intelligentsia (Sheth, 2004).¹ Their work in the early years was centred on generating awareness about social and environmental relations through education. This agenda was enacted through building and strengthening rural collective formations, and encouraging collective practices in the villages such as running pre-school learning centres, and organizing to generate and manage the village commons. This constructive program initiated by the UEEC, was largely taken up by women in the hill villages of this Himalayan State. Facilitated by these interventions of the UEEC, the Uttarkhand Mahila Parishad (UMP), a rural network comprising women's collectives in 450 villages, has emerged over a period of three decades.

In this predominantly rural and agrarian Himalayan region,² the underpinning philosophy for UEEC's work was that social and ecological relations and livelihood sustainability in the hills are deeply intertwined. Environmental education, a key component of their work, was conceptualized as a way of bridging the gap between formal institutions including public schools, government agencies, and the informal network of rural activists and collectives.³ The 1986 National Policy on Education (NEP) of the Government of India, which envisioned a dialectical relationship between

¹ Sheth (2004) calls them 'movement organizations', which differentiated themselves self-consciously and sharply from the welfare, philanthropical and other such non-political NGOs.

² The state of Uttarakhand was created after a popular people's movement for regional autonomy in the hills in 2000. The region known as Uttaranchal was a part of Uttar Pradesh until then. Uttarakhand is divided into two geographical regions-Kumaon and Garhwal which are historically and culturally different. The UEEC and the UMP have a greater presence in the Kumaon hills although there are CBOs and women's collectives that work in Garhwal as well which are a part of the network.

³ UEEC developed a curriculum for environment education which was introduced into regular school curriculum by the state government in 2000-2001. The curriculum was developed through extensive feedback, collaboration and participation of teachers, students, education department officials and rural communities through a series of workshops and interactions (Pande, 2001). UEEC also provided training to DIET (District Institute of Educational Training) master trainers who train teachers in state run schools.

education and empowerment, influenced their work in critical ways.⁴ Supporting and collaborating with existing rural networks and activists in different parts of the State, which aligned with UEEC's objective of promoting environmental education, was a way to work within a collective learning framework, and build on the lived experiences of people. UEEC's collaboration with community based organisations (henceforth CBOs), activists and individuals centred on programmatic interventions, including the formation of village women's collectives. In these hill districts of Uttarakhand, subsistence farming is the main economic activity and women are the primary cultivators in many regions of the state.⁵ Subsistence cultivation, livestock management, and the collection of fuel and fodder are activities that are largely carried out by women. The large-scale temporary out-migration of men, since the early nineteenth century, has been responsible for this particular gendered division of labour. The sense of place-based community in Uttarakhand is in part a product of the history of the region which has led to the formation of a somewhat cohesive hill identity (Linkenbach, 2006).⁶ Moreover, hill villages are small and relatively less stratified in terms of caste and land distribution and also high incidence of male migration means they are predominantly inhabited by women. These factors have been conducive to creating deliberative spaces which include all the women in the village.

⁴ The NEP was also the launching pad for other creative development programmes such as Mahila Samakhya, a government sponsored initiative for empowerment of rural women which began in the 1980s. Empowerment conceptualised in a Freirean framework as a process of critical reflection and radical conscientization within the NEP, and education was seen as an agent of empowerment and change in women's lives (Gupta & Sharma, 2006:p283).

⁵ About 72percent households own small plots of land. The availability of pasture and grazing land is crucial for better fodder availability for livestock in these districts and with 60% of the area under forest cover, forests are critical to livelihoods and agricultural productivity. The hill districts have poor infrastructure and non-farm employment opportunities are minimal (NFHS 3, 2005-2006).

⁶ Linkenbach (2006) shows how 'nature' in its particular form has historically become an important part of identity construction and an explicit point of reference for the local population in Uttarakhand, and how this process is linked to the formation of a political consciousness in the hills.

The appropriation of forests by both the colonial and the post-colonial state has over the decades, led to the diversification of livelihood strategies in the hills (Rangan, 2000; Gururani, 2002; Mehta, 1996). The region was the site for many people's movements primarily centred on the control and use of forests and their management, such as the Chipko protests in the 1970s (Guha, 2000). Despite women's everyday work of collecting forest produce and cultivation of small plots of land, community forest management institutional structures, such as the *van panchayats* (forest councils) were largely controlled by men until the 1970s. Following the prominent role of women in the Chipko protests, and subsequent policies by the government to regulate commercial forestry, women's inclusion in forest management, both informally and institutionally increased (Agrawal, 1997; Sarin, 2001). In this context, women's productive and reproductive work burden became central to the basic framework of interventions of the UEEC.

The most prominent program of the UEEC was the village *balwadis* (pre-school centres). They were set up with the objective of ensuring that children's learning from an early age was centred on issues and idioms which drew on their surrounding ecology, in contrast to the standardised government school curriculum. The pedagogical strategies in these centres focused on 'learning by doing' and the curriculum was structured around the immediate social and natural environment (Jackson, 2008; Pande, 2001). Girls from the villages were trained and then employed as teachers to run these centres. Their everyday management, however, was entrusted to the people in the villages and the local CBO. The pre-school centres became places for women to get together. But, conversations among women initially centred on managing the pre-school

centres, subsequently extended to include the use and management of village commons, forests, practices of cultivation, and other issues and conflicts which reflected the social and political relationships within the village.

In the years since the mid-1980s, women's collectives have been formed in 450 villages in seven districts of the State. I use the word 'collectives' as opposed to 'groups' to emphasize that these collectives consist of women from all village households.⁷ Women periodically hold meetings in villages to discuss issues and conflicts that emerge in their everyday life and also to collectively act on them. Managing and regulating the use of forests and water, running savings fund, engaging with local government institutions, and more recently, participating in electoral politics through village-level elected councils are some of the common practices and activities across villages. Regular interaction and sharing of experiences across different village collectives is facilitated through UEEC, and they have acted collectively on several occasions. In instances of mobilization, women draw on the solidarity within the network, but, in some cases mobilization also became the impetus for the formation of collectives. In the village collectives, some women take up leadership positions, while others become active during particular mobilizations. The absence of an official narrative means that the network functions as a fluid set of relationships and practices which enable women to mobilize at particular junctures and around specific issues. The boundaries of 'within' and 'without' in the articulation of interests, are constituted contingently at different points and around different issues (cf Wolford, 2003).

⁷ They are referred to as *sangathans* within the network which also translates into 'collective'.

In 2001, this rural network of women's collectives, the Uttarakhand Mahila Parishad or Uttarakhand Women's Federation (UMP), established a distinct identity from the UEEC, even as they continue to work as a network. The strategic reason behind this move was to enable the women's collectives to continue working autonomously in setting their agendas, in the current political-economic context, where development funding available is attached to the achievement of pre-determined goals and implementation of projects. But more significantly, it reflects the central role women have come to play in organizing and sustaining everyday collective practices, and the regional and state wide mobilizations on specific issues. The Women's Federation explicitly articulated their agenda as a whole, most visibly when they put up a candidate against mainstream political parties in the Uttarakhand State assembly elections of 2007.

Based on interviews with women leaders, UEEC workers and activists, and observations of interactions within the network in 2009, I reflect on why UEEC's focus on collective enactments of everyday practices opened up political spaces for women and shaped the conditions of possibility for social mobilizations on specific issues. UEEC's constructive program and subsequent developments draw attention to how everyday practices are sites for the exercise of power relations, negotiation of conflict, and therefore also productive sites for organizing and the generation of solidarity. The experiences of the network also suggest that understanding the formation of solidarity instrumentally, solely in the framework of achieving interests, is limiting. Construction of solidarity is not always circumscribed by an oppositional consciousness, but can also be understood as what Paulo Friere (1973) called a 'radical posture' which requires that

one enter into the situation of those with whom one is solidary (p. 34). The process of realizing such solidarity, as I will show, involves thinking through practices and experiences as well as an on-going process of addressing conflicts at multiple levels, rendering it inherently unstable. However, this solidarity at particular moments does enable enactment of an oppositional politics to achieve particular outcomes. Methodologically, shifting the analytical focus from 'resistance' to practices of organizing captures the process and interactions that generate deliberative relationships and social mobilizations within specific socio-political contexts, and understanding the formation of collective interests and meanings historically. This shift also enables a conceptualization that shows how everyday politics including the practices and the interactions they engender are implicated in political and economic processes at different scales (White, 1986; Edelman, 1999; Wolford, 2010).

In what follows, I elaborate on the organizing practices of UEEC activists and CBO workers, their reflections on the process, and the activities of the women's collectives. I draw on 30 interviews with people who played an active role in organizing the collectives and the various activities of the network. They include paid workers and activists (men and women) who work with the UEEC and the community based organisations in different regions, as well as women who have taken up leadership roles in the village collectives and the UMP. These interviews are suggestive of how collective engagement through practices enables a process of questioning deep-seated norms and conceptions and creative organizing strategies. The accounts of activists, workers and women leaders also outline the conjunctural factors that enabled them to imagine an experiential process of social change, and the struggles they faced in

facilitating the formation of women's collectives. I also observed monthly meetings in 14 villages, as well as a few regional meetings where women from several villages were present, and conducted focus group discussions with the women who were present at the meetings on those days. Observation of these meetings and conversations with the groups enabled me to understand the kind of issues and conflicts that emerge during discussion, how they are negotiated and resolved or not resolved, and the role of CBO and UEEC workers in facilitating these discussions. These 14 villages fall in the working area of five CBOs. UEEC currently works with 20 CBOs.⁸ The collectives in some of these villages have been working for 15-25 years and were formed more recently in others. Some of the interviews were also conducted at a two-day residential meeting in the town of Almora at the UEEC. Around 50 women from different villages participated in this meeting. These interviews and the focus group discussions were largely centred on experiences of organizing and the activities and practices of collectives. These activities, negotiations and discussions of the village collectives reveal the kind of conflicts that arise and the challenges entailed in enacting and sustaining collective practices. They also indicate the multiple subject positions women occupy which shapes the processes of negotiation. I also draw on documentation produced by UEEC workers and others on their work, such as annual reports, literature and evaluations of the pre-school centres and other programmatic interventions of the UEEC.⁹

⁸ The villages were selected in consultation with the staff at UEEC and regional CBOs.

⁹ This data was collected for a study that I conducted documenting the work of the UMP in 2009, while working as a researcher at the Institute of Social Studies Trust, New Delhi. The study was structured as a critical evaluation, and was commissioned by the UEEC and the Dayal Trust, a small local trust that funds their activities.

Critical Consciousness as a method of Organizing

The sphere of everyday practices critically highlights a relational conception of power and enables moving beyond conceiving the 'political' based on the identification of the dominant and marginalised subjects, which requires privileging particular hierarchies over others. In doing so, it becomes possible to understand how hierarchies of age, gender, class and caste are experienced and challenged, instead of inferring them based on an assumption of stable identities and interests or of unitary subjects (Ortner, 1995).¹⁰ As Agrawal (2005) points out there is a distinction to be made between politics generated by involvement in different kinds of practices, and politics that depend on stable interests, the articulation of which depends on belonging to certain social categories. Focussing on everyday politics on the one hand is useful because it can make visible the inherently unstable character of 'subaltern groups' through an examination of the multiple ways in which inequalities are experienced, and on the other hand the processes of formation of collective meanings, interests and solidarity. The construction of political agency through solidarity, conceived in this way, thus, is distinct from the strategic essentialisms of articulating stable interests and identities to achieve specific outcomes as well the assertion of place-based 'difference' through particular practices as a counter-hegemonic strategy (cf Escobar, 2008).¹¹

¹⁰ Ortner's discussion of what is problematic with resistance studies is suggestive of what is useful about focusing on everyday politics. She argues that they do not address the politics within 'subaltern groups' but are also culturally thin accounts which do not elaborate on processes that generate collective meanings and interests. Also, she contends that the resistance problematic operates at the level of individual subject's relationship with domination which assumes an autonomous consciousness in foregrounding questions of intentionality and identity.

¹¹ The deployment of particular place-based practices as counter-hegemonic strategies and/or discourses appears as ontological difference, in the absence of an elaboration of the process by which power relations structure everyday interactions. Escobar's notion of 'prefigurative politics' emphasises the significance of 'practices' in place-based self-organizing, as opposed to 'disembodied information' in

Escobar's emphasis on the centrality of 'practices' for enacting a pre-figurative politics, works with the same assumption of an autonomous sphere at the level of the collective that Scott's conception of everyday forms of resistance assumes at the level of individuals.

In contrast, practices became a way of realizing the collective learning framework within the UEEC network, which enabled women to have an increasing role in setting the agenda. The periodic village meetings and regional meetings facilitated by UEEC activists, where women from different villages get together enable inclusive and deliberative spaces where these practices, experiences and their outcomes are shared, reflected upon, and critically evaluated. This suggests why the explicit contestation of unequal gendered norms and mores in the enactment of practices became central to women's organizing efforts. Over the years the distinction between 'those who were doing the organizing' and 'those who were being organized' within the network is narrowing as women have taken up leadership roles and issues of concern to them have become foregrounded in the process of organizing. Enacting everyday practices also created the conditions and capacities that enabled mobilizations on specific issues by women, which have in the last decade largely centred on influencing the development agenda of government institutions through demanding accountability and through electoral politics.

political mobilisations. He defines 'pre-figurative politics' as "a way of acting that enacts in everyday practice the characteristics of a future world desired" (2008: 258). However, such an analytical delineation can be counterproductive as it is preoccupied with what is being 'pre-figured'. And, in doing so, 'everyday practices' are shifted to the discursive realm, obscuring the multiple relations of power that are constitutive of everyday practices.

Organizing through everyday practices is significant for two reasons in the UEEC network. First, the experiential and iterative organizing strategies which drew on and are enacted in the arena of everyday practices and interaction help to dissolve the hierarchy between those doing the 'organizing' and those being 'organized'. Practice-based interventions, thus served as mechanisms for generating a space for collective learning by UEEC activists which privileged women's experiences and their everyday concerns. This framework was premised on an understanding that perceptions and actions are mutually constitutive and that engendering critical consciousness is essential to the process of 'empowerment' (Friere, 1973).¹² Second, the contestations and co-operation engendered through the experience of enactment of practices generated a sense of solidarity and relational consciousness among women. This solidarity premised on critical reflection and action, most importantly created inclusive spaces for negotiation of conflict, which is an on-going struggle, but in specific instances has resulted in equitable distribution of resources. Hence, the process of engendering critical consciousness and solidarity are based on collective enactment of practices by women, who inhabit multiple positions in class and caste hierarchies, facilitated by UEEC activists.

Arun Agrawal's (2005) conceptualisation of 'political practices' in analysing the making of environmental subjects in Kumaon is also useful as it draws attention to the relationship between beliefs, actions, and perceptions. He challenges the assumption that subjectivities can be seen as durable sites where consciousness resides,

¹² UEEC activists envisaged 'practices' as pedagogy, challenging conceptions of learning that separate 'thinking' and 'doing'. The more structured part of UEEC's work such as designing text books, and a curriculum for environmental education, training government school teachers, and the pedagogical strategies adopted in the pre-school centres were informed by this approach. Their interactions with people in the villages generated key inputs and material for designing this curriculum, and informed their understanding of social and ecological relationships (Jackson 2008). While these aspects of UEEC's work are not a focus of this paper, their attempts to organize everyday practices in the villages and get women together were undoubtedly influenced by this approach to learning.

determining how people behave. Instead, he suggests that there is an iterative relationship between practices and perceptions, and, it is the 'recognition of this contingency that makes it possible to introduce the register of the 'political' in thinking about the creation of the subject' (p. 166). Building on his contention that the formation of collective interests and subjectivities can be understood within an integrated framework through practices, I show that this contingent character is what makes 'practices' significant as modes of organizing. The iterative relationship between actions and perceptions is rendered meaningful through engendering a critical consciousness. Both Friere and Gramsci draw attention to the organizational and pedagogical element of the diffusion of a critical consciousness as a method. In Gramscian terms (1971) this involves an awareness of one's conception of the world and its coherence. Thus, what appear to be episodic and disjointed responses to immediate problems can be situated as part of a historical process and in relation to other conceptions (p.324). Similarly, Friere (1973) suggests that conceiving critical consciousness as a method, involves the process of 'naming' the conditions of oppression. The role of organizing by UEEC activists specifically has been to initiate a process that foregrounds inequalities which structure everyday practices through collective engagement, and facilitate linkages between existing rural collective formations and women's collectives in the region which enables sharing of experiences and situating the 'immediate' and the 'everyday' in relation to the broader context.

At the level of practices, it is difficult to delineate the aspects that are 'dependent' and 'independent' of the dominant practices and discourses, which are historical and shape the subjectivities of the actors even as they are shaped by their actions. As

Mitchell (1990) argues the conception of 'external' domination which generates resistance by 'subaltern subjects' with an autonomous consciousness not only presumes coherent subjects, but is also rooted in a more fundamental assumption about the existence of distinctive material and cultural spheres, which goes unchallenged. He further suggests that the appearance of this dualism between material reality and an ideational sphere is a particular form of exercise of power.¹³ This division between the material and the ideational underpins the so-called 'technical interventions' that have become dominant in development practices of government and non-government institutions in this region and more generally (Ferguson, 1994; Sarin, 2001). Critical studies of development practices, argue that interventions aimed at societal transformation, and couched in the terminology of capacity building and empowerment, attempt to convince 'local communities' to reorganize their socio-economic environment according to pre-determined goals, thus, the conception of 'participation' is inherently limiting (Li, 2007; Cooke & Kothari, 2001; Mohan & Hickey, 2005). Even as they outline and challenge the effects of 'technical interventions', the dualism between material and ideational realm is reproduced, in the implication that conditions for exercise of political agency are absent. The tension surrounding political agency is visible in arguments which suggest that development projects irrespective of who initiates them and for what purpose generate what are called 'unpredictable outcomes' and possibly hold emancipatory potential, as they encourage new subject positions (Sharma, 2008; Klenk, 2004). In contrast, as I will illustrate, the programmatic interventions of the UEEC such as the pre-school centres which were drawn from the repertoire of existing activities of

¹³ O' Hanlon (1988) also makes the same argument in her critique of the Subaltern Studies project in their attempts to recover histories of resistance in colonial South Asia.

women and rural collective formations, were conceived as 'practices', whose significance was centred on the process of collective enactment. Their attempt was therefore to 'make critical' already existing activities (Gramsci, 1971).¹⁴ Such an approach becomes particularly significant in the context of a wide consensus that processes of institutionalisation among NGOs obstruct alternative pathways of social change in the contemporary moment (cf Thayer, 2009; Alvarez, 2009; Feldman, 2003).

Section I: Building a Constructive Politics

In the mid-1980s, the modus operandi of UEEC was deep engagement with people either directly or through existing rural collectives and activists in an attempt to begin with everyday lived experiences as opposed to pre-conceived objectives. This strategy was distinct from mobilising people to carry out specific activities or advocacy and creating awareness around particular issues based on prior conceptions of activists and workers. In their own words, the objective was "to encourage a fragile idea of creating a social movement to improve education, health, socio-economic and environmental relations in the hills" (Annual Report 2006-07: 2). The envisaged aim was not to improve the 'status' of the people or the environment but to generate dialogue about social and ecological relationships.

UEEC's work was inspired by Madhav Ashish, a thinker and philosopher who headed the Mirtola Ashram near Almora, cultivating a small farm as a model of environmentally sound rural development (Ashish 1980; 1993). Ashish argued that it was

¹⁴ As Gramsci (1971) argues the philosophy of praxis, first of all "must be a criticism of common sense, basing itself initially, however, on common sense in order to demonstrate that "everyone" is a philosopher and that it is not a question of introducing from scratch a scientific form of thought into everyone's individual life, but of renovating and making 'critical' an already existing activity" (p. 330-331). The focus on 'practices' as a political inversion has to be understood in the context of a historical trajectory where the division between theory and practice is reproduced through their hierarchical relationship.

imperative that village communities organize their everyday agricultural practices collectively, to prevent further degradation of forests and other resources in the region. The struggle for greater control over the village commons and forests by the local population has been a long-standing one in the region, but Ashish (1993) believed that education and generating awareness about the relationship between agriculture, livelihood practices and ecology was critical to motivate people to collectively improve their everyday lives. He writes for instance,

There is no easy answer as to how such improvements can be brought about. Anyone can propose enclosures, plantations, stall-feeding of cattle, the rationalisation of bullock numbers by introducing service ploughing, and other such seemingly straightforward and practical changes, but very few people, other than the villagers themselves, are aware of the intricate relationships between every activity on the land, such that any change in one is likely to have repercussions on all the others. For example, for the women to have the time and energy for cutting and carrying all the fodder required for stall-feeding, they would need fuelwood supplies close at hand, water for the households and livestock piped to their houses, and, if possible, a power-driven flour mill in the village, and a 'balwari' to care for their children while they are at work. Furthermore, the enormous variations in topography, soil types, altitude belts, and human communities, which characterise the UP hills, make it impractical to think in terms of uniform programmes and administrative processes. Village communities must be free to discover what particular approach to new land management, will suit their specific conditions (p. 1793).

This was a distinctive approach particularly in the context of the Chipko agitations which were primarily directed at the state, protesting against commercial forestry and the increasing benefits accruing to 'outsiders' from the resources of the

hills.¹⁵ Whereas, the Chipko protests were often framed as ‘community vs the state’, Ashish argued that resolving conflicts and improving cultivation practices at the village level through co-operation and collective action was also critical, focussing attention on the need to address power relations and hierarchies at multiple levels in the process of self-organizing.¹⁶

In the early years, funding for UEEC’s activities came both from the government’s Department of Education and small local trusts. The funding through these institutions for interventions in the broad framework of environmental education, and not for specific projects, allowed for an experiential and adaptive way of functioning. Small groups which were carrying out seemingly disparate activities in the hill villages, such as running schools, cultivating collective nurseries for plants and seedlings for rejuvenating forests, and ecological awareness building, were supported with minimum amount of funds by the UEEC. “They were farmers, teachers, women cultivators, community leaders... Some of them were followers of Mahatma Gandhi whilst others, disillusioned by the trends of development in the hills had turned to activism. Some of them believed in a radical approach to development and were ready to start ‘revolution’ in the villages” (Annual Report, 2006-07). Over the years, some of these groups registered as NGOs and have expanded the range of their activities. The term ‘CBO’ (community based organisations) used to refer to these groups encompasses a range of organizational structures, from one or two persons to those with formal structures; organisations with long histories of working in the area and those which are only a few

¹⁵ See the debate between Madhav Ashish and Vandana Shiva & Bandopadhyaya in *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 14, No. 41 (Oct. 13, 1979), pp. 1733+1735-1736).

¹⁶ This debate on the different modes of struggle was taking place as the movement for regional autonomy was becoming active in the late eighties, to create a new State within the federal union comprising the eight Himalayan districts (Rangan, 2000; Mawdsley, 1998).

years old. There are some organizations that have been associated with UEEC through the entire period, even as they access funds from other sources. Some now have larger budgets than the UEEC, but have continued their association by participation in common activities, because of the support that being part of this large network provides and the durable character of the relationships established over several decades.¹⁷

Programmatic interventions and practices were arrived at through engagement with CBOs and women in the villages. UEEC was accessible to rural activists and small groups and worked with them to develop a framework for collective learning. The head of a small CBO, recalls his first interaction with UEEC in 1994 as a conversation centred on motivations, strategies and specificities of his district. He says, “I came to UEEC with no concrete proposal but just the will to do social work. These days one has to write elaborate proposals in English to get aid from funding agencies which make them inaccessible to people like me”. The area where his organization works, he says is staunchly patriarchal and the reason he is able to work with women is because of the reputation he has established doing social work over 20 years which also included helping people in small ways like filling out pension forms, taking someone to the hospital when they are ill. In the initial years, he says,

Our first steps were plantation of nurseries and creating a forest on an almost barren hill in one area, together with the people in the surrounding villages. We used the example of this forest in our organizing efforts in other villages, to approach people and convince them of the benefits of collective work. The first thing is to go and establish a rapport in the village, find out what their problems are, build relationships and help them out in

¹⁷ Between 1987 and 2006, USNPSS, as a nodal agency of the Ministry of Human Resource and Development, Department of Education supported around 281 CBOs/ NGOs. Since 2006, the number of organisations associated with USNPSS has declined and no new ones are being added, largely due to a reduction in the funds available as the government withdrew its support. There are currently 20 CBOs working in different districts in the state, through which the funds get channelled for the *balwadi* programme and for activities of women’s collectives.

whatever way you can. In the first instance we do not go and say we have come to form a women's group, otherwise people expect a scheme of some kind. We just gather women and talk to them about their problems. Initially in a village only some women come for meetings, then gradually others start feeling left out or curious and decide to come as well.

As he suggests, the absence of defined goals aimed at achieving measurable impact, makes context specific strategies and activities of organizing in different regions possible. UEEC facilitated sustained interactions between these various rural collectives and organizations to link activities and provide a space for exchange and reflection. The CBOs functioned autonomously, not as conduits or managers of programmatic interventions conceived by UEEC activists. The relationships that most CBO workers share with people in their area of work, means that organizing practices are not based on the assumption of abstracted economic, environmental or gendered subjects, but are shaped through their interactions with women in their specific area and with other actors in the network. Lived experiences, relationships and enactment of collective practices, were thus mutually constitutive in restructuring and generating an affirmative politics.

Thinking through Practices and Experiences

While UEEC excluded offering material incentives or income generation schemes from the agenda, the process of organising had a strong material base rooted in the ecology of the region. Practices were aimed at regenerating resources necessary for subsistence, ensuring their equitable distribution and reducing women's workload. The repertoire of tangible activities was drawn from the work of existing organisations and rural collectives and developed further based on interactions with people at the

village level. The approach to implementing these activities emphasized both collective work and responsibility at the village level and context-specific strategies to foreground inclusive practices. Hence, they became entry points to generating conversation and negotiations around a diverse set of issues.

CBO workers often make a distinction between what are called '*rachnatmak karya*' and the work of creating awareness through discussion and dialogue. *Rachnatmak karya*, a concept which has a Gandhian legacy literally translates into 'creative acts' and is used here to refer to tangible activities such as running a *balwadi*, creating nurseries and forests, cleaning pathways and natural water bodies in the village, construction of toilets, some of the activities that were supported by UEEC (cf Skaria, 2002).¹⁸ They identify these activities as the core of their organizing work, and the process of discussion and dialogue, is immanent on these activities.

In the early years, the *balwadi* (pre-school centres), an educational programme for young children, connected the organisation with people and particularly women in the most direct way. As monetary support extended to CBOs for setting up the *balwadi* was minimal, it was critical that the people from the village take responsibility for their everyday functioning. In most instances, people contributed labour, space and/or time and they were started only in villages where there was palpable interest after initial discussions. The *balwadis* have been able to function successfully because of the

¹⁸ Skaria (2002) in examining the politics of the concept of the 'Gandhian Ashram' points to its conceptualisation as not a place but a set of political practices that were meant to produce 'neighbourliness'. Central to the concept of 'neighbourliness' is a shared history and culture but also absolute difference, and together they articulated a critique of liberal modernity. The idea of constructive politics itself has a Gandhian legacy. As Chatterjee (1993) points out Gandhi's intervention in the construction of a nationalist movement was distinctive as it was by informed by a moral vision as opposed to clear goals or common material interests or identities. An experimental notion of the 'political' is complementary to a fluid moral vision where concrete strategies cannot be defined as there are no clear goals, but emerge through practices and activities. As a consequence organizing emphasizes practices, and 'learning by doing' to construct an evolving agenda. The idea of 'neighbourliness' also emphasizes the often neglected aspect of co-operation and solidarity which is also a part of everyday politics.

efforts and involvement of women as the provision of child care was highly valued by them. CBO workers point out, that the parent meetings that were called in the initial years essentially became gatherings of women where discussion over issues other than the *balwadi* also started taking place. The setting up of *balwadis* was thus instrumental in the formation of women's collectives in many villages.

The reason women predominantly engaged with the programmatic interventions of UEEC was because they offered immediate benefits which reduced their everyday work burden. The provision of child care through the *balwadi*, as well as UEEC's broader agenda of ecological sustainability resonated with women given their particular gendered responsibilities. Men have played an important role in the formation of women's collectives, as activists with the UEEC, and the community based organisations. Other men also occasionally attend the village meetings, they generally come and sit on the periphery and sometimes also contribute to the discussion.

Many current UEEC and CBO women workers began their journey as *balwadi* teachers. While the *balwadi* teacher's main work was looking after children, teachers were instrumental in organizing other women. These teachers and supervisors were usually girls from villages who were trained at UEEC. For many of the girls, the trip to the town of Almora for the training was their first time outside the village. Their experiences of organizing in the early years and their personal journeys reveal the challenges posed by patriarchal gendered norms. In an interview, Pushpa Devi, who began working in 1969 and now heads one of the oldest CBOs in the Danya region,¹⁹ talks about how difficult it was to convince parents to send their daughters for training.

¹⁹ This CBO is run by Lakshmi Ashram, one of the oldest Gandhian organisations in the region working with UEEC. They were running *balwadis* since 1982 and expanded their programs to more villages with support from UEEC.

In those days people in the villages were proud of the *balwadi* teachers from their village, because girls were coming out of their houses and doing something, which was novel. They also took an active interest and looked after the running of the *balwadi* with minimal supervision from the organization. When the first 10-day training was held for *balwadi* teachers, parents refused to send their girls. They said you cannot just leave them and come back, we will only send them if you stay with them there for 10 days. I said to them, I am also a young girl and I have come from so far to live in your village which was unknown to me. All of you have helped me and supported me. Finally, after some convincing they agreed.

Her account of these early years suggests how solidarity and support from people in the villages was important for the work of *balwadi* teachers. This support was often not spontaneous but generated through dialogue. Like Pushpa Devi, for many of CBO workers, particularly women, their own experiences were not far removed from the women they were organizing. Interviews with other women CBO workers also indicate that their strategies for organizing emerged both from their own experiences and evolved iteratively through interactions in the village. A process of questioning their own sedimented assumptions was often initiated through these interactions. For instance, Rupa, another worker with the same CBO, started teaching at the *balwadi* in her native village as a young girl. She says,

I loved working with the children but had to leave work after three years when I got married and left for my husband's village. I wanted to continue working but it was not possible. I started experiencing problems at my in-laws place. My husband was not employed and started mistreating me. When my son was only a few months old I came back to my parent's house and started working at the *balwadi* again. I went from house to

Some of the core staff at UEEC began their journey here working as teachers. Lakshmi Ashram was established in 1946 with the objective of educating rural women and girls, drawing on Gandhian philosophy, and training them to be community activists and start programmes for social change in their home villages (Klenk, 2004, p. 63).

house to convince people to send their girls to the balwadi, did all kinds of odd jobs to help people-wrote their letters, went with them to the bank to fill out applications...I realised that despite having studied till inter-school, I got married into a household where I was not respected... My confidence grew as I kept working and also I knew from personal experience the kind of problems women have to face.

As Rupa suggests, her personal experiences shaped her approach to organizing, and was based on interactions with other women, where the network provided her with a space to imagine an alternative life course. She emphasizes the importance of building long-standing relationships for gaining trust and understanding the cultural milieu in order to creatively facilitate change. Contemplating on the future, Rupa adds, “These days old Gandhian organisations are not getting any funding, it is only going to project-based NGOs but there is no feeling in that work. I understand these women because I was one of them, but I feel I have become different now over the years. I have become accustomed to leading a samajik (societal) life –leaving every day in the morning with my bag, going to the villages, talking to people, sharing their happiness and sorrow and helping in small ways that I can. Sometimes I wonder what I will do if the CBO shuts down, because I cannot go back to being confined to looking after the cattle, and working in the fields only”.

While women in this region have never been confined to the home or their own fields, and have always walked to the forests in groups to gather fuel wood, water and fodder, getting together to talk about village affairs was not easily accepted. CBO workers had to contend with gendered norms restricting women’s participation in public life, particularly in villages where women’s collectives have been formed more consciously as opposed to older collectives that emerged somewhat organically around

the pre-school centres. Working through concrete activities was a less contentious strategy as it was perceived by men to be in the interest of the village, whereas efforts to organize deliberative meetings constituted an evident break from the norm. In the long run, however, working through these activities collectively generated the confidence among women to adopt confrontational tactics and mobilize around contentious issues such as alcohol abuse and violence by men in public spaces.

Organizing women particularly in the early years often caused conflict within the household. Kamala Devi from Chamoli district compares the challenges of organizing women in the 1970s to now. She attempted to form a collective in 1974 in her marital village inspired during a visit to a relative's house in Reni village, site of one of the earliest Chipko protests. When she made attempts to get women together to plant a forest, elderly people in the village accused her of misleading their daughters-in-law and her own in-laws were furious. In 2004, she and her husband came back to the village after several years and she again decided to approach the local CBO and get women together as the village forest had more or less disappeared. She says,

We started work again, by cleaning the village paths and the natural springs. Older women like me can take more liberties, people also listen to them. When young daughters-in-law become too active, people frown and no one takes them too seriously. Decades ago I was young I was harassed by everyone when I tried to do something. The men are more supportive now, since they have seen the results of the work women are doing but it is still not easy working in the village. These days there is less opposition from families, but it has become very hard to motivate women to work for the welfare of the village. Young girls who come to the village as daughters' in-law are more educated and knowledgeable but there is no willingness on their part to work for the village as a whole.

As she suggests, challenges shifted gradually, reflecting how women's efforts have contributed to changing gendered norms in the villages. Building women's own capacities was an important part of creating conditions which enabled them to confront pressures from men and within households. In most accounts of the early years of formation of collectives, resistance from men initially surfaced in the struggle over public spaces where women would hold meetings, or was expressed in the form of accusations against women and CBO workers who played a key role in organizing women. Travelling outside the villages to attend meetings and trainings was another major point of contention among men and village elders. In many instances women themselves were apprehensive about the idea and generally attributed their inability to participate in meetings to their illiteracy. On further probing, however, they often acknowledged that elderly women generally without any formal schooling prove to be more effective as leaders. They command more authority among the women but also among young men, given their higher status within the household. Their participation generates trust towards the CBO and the UEEC in the village, and has a legitimating effect on changing entrenched gender norms about women's role in public life and spaces. Lack of time is another factor, which makes it difficult for younger women to participate actively or take up leadership positions. Age and literacy levels significantly influence women's perceptions of their own capacities and their ability to engage with collective activities differently, along with caste and economic status.

One of the common themes that emerged from interviews with CBO workers and women is the association of capacity and leadership abilities with formal literacy in women's own perceptions. This is also reflected in the de-valuation of their own work.

During discussions and interactions CBO and UEEC workers emphasize the value of daily work carried out by women and associated with village life, whether it is farming or looking after cattle. Women are asked to reflect when they refer to themselves as 'backward' or refer to the work they do together like cleaning paths and clearing bushes in the village as small and inconsequential. Cleaning the village paths and common water bodies at regular intervals, are activities that women's collectives routinely engage in. It is usually decided at the monthly meetings when and who will do these tasks. Cleaning mud paths in the villages is of tremendous help to women who often take them carrying heavy loads, while going to the forest and fetching water. Deepa, a CBO worker from Dwarahat for instance, talks about how she realized what collective learning and purposeful education is through her interactions with women and other workers in the network.

My husband is a teacher in the village school but was involved with UEEC, and worked with the *balwadi* and women's collectives. I came from a conservative family and used to find all this very odd in the beginning. He would constantly encourage me to go for the meetings of the *sangathan* in the village. Soon I realized that despite being a graduate my education had only given me bookish knowledge. When it was my turn to speak at these meetings, I was very nervous and felt embarrassed that I was literate and yet could not speak in a gathering of women. I then started attending training sessions and giving health trainings to adolescent girls for which I had to re-educate myself. I read a lot and had many conversations with the Auxiliary Nurse Midwives in the villages. I used to admire women in the cities and towns who had regular jobs. Now I think we do much more work than them. They only work for themselves. We understand practical things like what happens in a Block Development Committee meeting...or that on Sundays when the children are home, women have time to come for meetings, because the children look after the cattle. These are not small matters.

What Deepa eloquently points towards is that the process of building capacities and 'empowerment' is context specific and involves rethinking dominant narratives through one's own experiences and through interactions with other women. These dominant narratives include caste and gendered norms reproduced through socialization, but also orthodoxies encoded in formal standardised education (cf Morarji, 2010). Her account also suggests that in the absence of master agendas and specified strategies, CBO workers, devise their organizing strategies based on their interactions within the villages, and the structured and unstructured interactions in which they participate within the network. The experiential character of strategies of organizing is particularly evident in the context of changes in gendered norms and mores which have come about gradually. Many of the women CBO workers struggle with their own deep-seated conceptions of gendered norms and draw on their own life experiences in their interactions with other women. The narratives of CBO workers and women leaders suggest that practices, political goals and articulation of collective interests are mutually generative. The lens of 'experience' allows us to see women and activists as inhabiting multiple subject positions, and the changes in perceptions engendered through material practices and interactions (Scott, 1991).

Monthly meetings in the villages are spaces where women get together, discuss and take decisions about the well-being of the village and chart their own agenda. The meetings are structured in a way that the process of reflection, debate and communication is a collaborative exercise between UEEC and CBO workers and women. The CBO workers do not draw on any official narrative; instead the discussions at these meetings suggest that interactions with women and men in the villages and

their experiences inform their strategies of organizing and the activities they agree upon. CBO workers are not always present at the village meetings, particularly where collectives have existed for a long time and women largely carry out their activities and discussions autonomously. While women are able to enter into dialogue on their immediate concerns and enact collective practices through meetings in the village, regional and state level meetings facilitate interactions with women from other villages, CBO and UEEC workers. These interactions enable them to link their immediate concerns with broader issues and in some instances facilitate collective action as a larger group, creating a sense of network and support. They provide a space for deeper reflection on their everyday activities within the village which has implications for subsequent actions as the following discussion at a regional meeting illustrates.

Women from several villages gathered and the subject of discussion was a protest they had organized, blocking traffic (*chakkajam*) in the town of Dwarahat for several hours, to demand that the local administration address the problem of stray cattle. The problem of stray cattle that enter fields and destroy crops has become widespread in recent years across the region. The CBO worker facilitating the meeting cautions that it is important to be aware of laws while conducting protests and demanding their rights. The rule is that the local administration needs to be informed a day before any protest that involves large numbers of people. One woman points out that the local administration often creates unjustified hurdles when they know they are going to be targeted. The discussion then moves to the core of the problem - why the number of stray cattle has increased. Some women pointed out, that households with excess cattle just let them go as taking care of them becomes difficult. The scarcity of

fodder and water in the village means walking long distances to procure them. The CBO representative who is also a school teacher cites the example of a girl who regularly missed school as the number of cattle had increased in their house and her mother could not take care of them alone. He then suggests that while holding protest and *chakkajams*, one should also try and understand the root of the problem to come up with specific solutions which may be more productive. The group at the end of the meeting decides to petition the local administration to start open cow shelters where people can go and leave their cattle.

The experience of participating in trainings and meetings at UEEC in Almora or attending regional meetings with the local CBO and women from other villages in the region, creates a sense of being part of a state-wide or the regional network and not just members of an isolated village collectives. Women who have not travelled outside the village in person have also heard stories from other women and CBO workers which create a sense of belonging to the larger network. In many instances, protests at the village level by women on issues such as abusive behaviour by men or against corrupt government officials and institutions are supported by women from neighbouring villages. Interactions and sharing of experiences particularly with other women who are perceived to be 'like one's self' at regional and state level meetings have a critical impact on expanding aspirational horizons in terms of what seems achievable, and confidence building.

Most women say that meetings and trainings are spaces where they can express themselves and where they have learnt how to express themselves publicly. They value their ability to speak with government officials, in particular, which enables

them to articulate their developmental priorities. The interview of a woman in Chamoli district cited in an Annual Report (2008-2009) points towards how this process of capacity building occurs over a long period of time and influences their relationships within the household as well.

Earlier, women had no names...people used to refer to us by taking the name of our elder child or of the husband. I do not even know the names of my mother and mother-in-law. It is only when we got organised that we began to understand this issue...in women's meetings we are asked to introduce ourselves. We say our name...which is our identity. By attending meetings at Almora, we learn many things and when we go back to our village, this learning is translated in to action. This can transform thoughts at home too...now, my children know my name. They also know what I am doing and this in a way creates a new support system for me.

Unlike interventions targeted at individuals and households, which do not engage with the social and political relations in which they are situated, 'empowerment' here is understood as a part of the process of generating a collective consciousness, (Cleaver in Cooke & Kothari, 2001). Women leaders conceptualize both 'development' and 'empowerment' within a relational framework, emphasizing the process by which the direction of desired change is arrived at. For instance Mohini Devi, the leader of a regional federation, suggests that there has been a lot of development in the villages since the formation of the collectives. When I questioned her about what she means by 'development', she said, "It is about awareness - that people consciously see each other, and learn and work for the village collectively. Development is not just more schemes." It is noteworthy that Mohini Devi juxtaposes her understanding of development to the dominant one which she associates with income generation projects and the provision of services by state and other non-state actors.

This understanding of 'empowerment' among UEEC activists and women leaders draws on the Frierian (1973) conceptualization of the term, where reflection and action in the world are mutually constitutive, as well as feminist understandings which emphasize consciousness raising and building solidarity (Sharma, 2008; John, 1996). As Batliwala (2007) argues, the meaning of 'empowerment' has shifted from when it was first employed by feminist activists in the 1980s, as transformation in societal relations to becoming a technical magic bullet of micro-credit programmes and political quotas for women. Empowerment is simply a measure of performance on certain indicators such as literacy level, participation in political governance institutions or ownership and control over economic assets. In focusing on power relations within the household and on the material and institutional constraints in conceptualizing empowerment, the realm of the social has been underemphasized.

Working through Practices and Hierarchies

A historically informed experiential and iterative approach to organizing means that women are not perceived as abstracted subjects. The activities and practices encouraged by activists, particularly in the initial years, such as managing the *balwadi*, cleaning common spaces and water bodies in the village, devising rules for collecting fuel wood and cattle grazing in the forests, organizing savings fund and using the money for buying collective goods, performing folk songs on auspicious occasions, have become practices identified with the Women's Federation. While descriptively they span a range that can be characterised as 'social', 'economic' or 'ecological' practices, they come together as collective enactments to generate a relational consciousness.

These activities which were drawn from the repertoire of the existing rural collective formations in the region that UEEC worked with in the initial years, play a crucial role in forming the collective in any village initially, but are subsequently adapted, modified and sometimes discarded by women according to their needs. While working within a common and related framework, activities are structured at the village level by women according to their needs. Thus, village collectives have their own unique trajectories, determined by the specific social, economic and political milieu of the village, regional CBO interactions, and the leadership emerging within the village. Yet, common across villages are attempts to challenge inequality through the inclusion of women from all households and facilitating interactions between them. Socio-economic hierarchies within the village are openly discussed and in the course of their everyday activities.

For instance, some collectives have savings fund, others do not and the savings are used for different purposes. Since the collectives consist of women from all households in the village, the amount of contribution is decided based on the capacity of the lowest income households. The money is used for different purposes, but most collectives buy large utensils, chairs, tables for use on auspicious occasions such as weddings and other such things which can be used by all households in the village. In some villages even though women did not contribute money, the savings fund originated through fines imposed by the collectives for breaking rules on use of forest produce or cattle grazing, which they devise collectively, as well as through fines imposed on men for alcohol abuse. In a few instances women take out an interest free loan for household needs such as buying cattle, building a house or books for children. In Dwarahat region, for example, women point out that inter-loaning has reduced

dependence of households on moneylenders. A worker from the region says, “The biggest achievement of the collectives has been breaking the hold of powerful families in the village that usually had a greater say in everyday matters in the village, because of indebtedness.” The savings fund is not an exclusionary practice and even women who are not able to contribute money are involved in the other activities, they are entitled to use the common utensils when the need arises, and in many instances are able to take loans from the fund as well. In many instances, particularly among the older collectives, women stopped collecting money after they had accumulated the things they perceived to be necessary for communal use. It was also simply used as a practice to get women together in the initial years by CBO workers which sometimes just dissolved over the years.

Other practices at the village level were derived from everyday spaces of sociality, but were structured in ways that specifically challenged inequalities. For instance, folk songs and dances were used in the initial years by workers as a way to get women together and start the village meetings. Over the years, inspirational songs which recognize women’s collective efforts were also included and the practice of collective singing became a form of struggle against gendered norms about women’s participation in the social life of the village. The president of a village collective in Almora points out that before the formation of the collective, women did not participate in the wedding procession. She adds, “We also go to every house on the festival of Holi, whereas earlier women did not dare come out of their houses on that day, as men would misbehave after drinking alcohol”. After years of struggle these activities have become naturalised in many villages.

Protests against alcohol abuse by women, which are widespread across the State, were also to a large extent about reclaiming public spaces as being safe for women. Anti-alcohol mobilisations by women have been the catalyst for formation of collectives in some villages. On this issue in particular, openly confrontational tactics such as locking up men who were publicly indulging in abusive behaviour, waylaying men to check if they had been drinking before they enter the village, pouring water over groups of men drinking and gambling in public spaces have been used. This is because of the persistence of the problem, as women's interventions have had only short term effects. The liquor shops run by the government is one of the primary reasons for the persistence of the problem. Along with attempting to control the behaviour of men in the villages, there have been campaigns protesting the opening of these shops and occasionally women have picketed them as well. Usually these mobilizations comprise women from several villages in a region, but have had only short-term successes.²⁰ Over the years, however, the authority of the collectives has been - even if reluctantly - accepted in many villages. For instance, men comply and pay the fines imposed on them for abusive behaviour. In one village, women said they were able to publicly shame and make the elected head of the village-council pay a fine, because he was unable to do anything in front of a large group of women. It is clear that the authority women are able to command comes from their collective strength.

It has been relatively easy for women to mobilize around issues such as alcohol abuse because it provokes strong sentiments and affects women in many rural households. However, other issues such as caste norms or organising to ensure equal

²⁰ Pathak (1985) traces anti-alcohol protests in the hill region to 1907-08 when liquor shops sponsored by the colonial government were opened in some districts in the region and active protests in the 1980s. These mobilizations are partly a consequence of presence of several Gandhian organisations.

access to village commons which that challenge class interests between households require greater intervention and persuasion by CBO workers. Discussions at monthly meetings indicate that many village collectives have had severe conflicts which have led to the discontinuation of their activities and meetings. Some of the common reasons cited by women for collectives becoming dysfunctional include creation of factions in the village during *panchayat* (village council) elections and disputes over mismanagement of the savings fund. The UMP coordinator says, "Collectives become dysfunctional and start working again all the time for various reasons. We try to help them resolve the dispute but then let it go. What we have seen so far is that women often realize the importance of the work they had been doing and assimilate again. It is only when they feel the need themselves, that the collective works effectively." CBO workers also point out that in predominantly lower caste villages, where households do not own small plots, women go out to labour and earn daily wages, and do not have the time to organize, as it means loss of income.²¹

The formation of collectives has encouraged inter-mixing among different castes in the villages, a process which began with children eating together in the *balwadis*. A UEEC worker, however, points out that some women are still reluctant to eat with everyone when they come for regional and state meetings, particularly when they come from single-caste villages. Certain practices like giving dowry and caste rules about intermixing have entered the ambit of discussion and women acknowledge the need to counter them but these discussions do not always translate easily into altering behaviour which requires constant persuasion. In one village, during the focus group

²¹ While relatively less unequal in terms of distribution of land compared to the rest of the country, the Scheduled Castes and Tribes (which form 2-4% of the population) are disadvantaged in terms of landholdings and dominate the small population of agricultural wage labour (NFHS 3, 2005-2006).

discussion, women said that the collective in their village had split into two some years ago and they have been able to work collectively better since then. In a conversation later, the CBO worker explained that the two collectives in this village now were composed of upper and lower caste women.

Generating solidarity among women even within these relatively less stratified and small hill villages is an on-going process of struggle, as they inhabit multiple subject positions in the class and caste hierarchies (Ortner, 1995; Akerkar, 1995). Radha Devi, who led the collective in her village for 11 years and also served as an elected representative in the village council for five years, points out that there are 12 different castes in her village, which makes it very difficult to work collectively. Her experiences indicate that the costs of leadership in such a context are tremendous. When the *sangathan* was formed 15 years ago, she says no one was willing to take the responsibility of leadership. Her attempts to ensure equal access to piped water through regulating the four taps in the village is one of the several instances she narrates which met with severe resistance, particularly from upper caste men in the village who have consistently harassed her. While women often draw support from other women in such instances, collectives also split around existing divisions within the village. The task of women who take up leadership roles in the village involves tremendous challenges and the lack of willingness to accept leadership is one of the main reasons for collectives not being able to sustain their activities and practices. While aspiring towards equity, the creation of such deliberative spaces and practices facilitate the explicit articulation of inequalities and an inclusive process of negotiation. Thus, solidarity premised on addressing conflicts, and is inherently unstable. Everyday social interactions within the

village between women which are structured by power relations do not always allow for such negotiations to even take place. It becomes possible at these meetings to do so partly due to interventions and presence of activists and also because of the collective presence of 'village' where women can draw support from others. The support from the wider network becomes critical when the divisions within the village are strong on particular issues- either along gendered differences as in the case of anti-alcohol mobilizations or class differences among households- visible in decision-making around management of village commons. On-going negotiation of conflicts and differences has been an essential part of the emergence of women as political subjects, acting on and articulating their shared interests. It is not possible to clearly delineate organizing efforts and mobilizations as being directed 'inwards' or 'outwards'. This is particularly evident in the management and use of village commons, which is a core part of organizing efforts of women.

Negotiating and enforcing regulations for usage of common resources and cattle grazing is done at the monthly meetings. Management and decision making in this context involves addressing power relations within the village as certain dominant households generally have disproportional access to limited resources. Women decide on rules for access, like opening the village forest for collecting wood at certain times during the year, prohibition on cutting young trees and branches, and excessive cattle grazing to ensure equal distribution of fodder and fuel among all households. Compliance with rules negotiated at village meetings is high, as women from all the households in the village participate in negotiating and enforcing these rules. These practices reduce conflict between households and regulate the use of common

resources to ensure equal access and distribution. A former primary school teacher in a village in Seraghat who also manages the savings account of the collective in his village says, "I think their biggest achievement has been solving the cattle problem. It used to create so much conflict in the village earlier, fights would break out every day somewhere and the farms were not as productive. They have planted almost 8000 trees in the forest, and no amount of money or pressure from the forest department could have achieved that". In many villages, forests and water sources have been regenerated or forests have been planted on almost barren hillsides through women's efforts. The formation of collectives has also facilitated inter-village co-ordination on these matters, and enabled women to have greater bargaining power in dealing with the forest department.

Women's participation in informal community forest management and various micro-institutional arrangements, initiated by state and non-state actors, including the *van panchayats* (forest councils) instituted by the colonial government in 1931 and revived by NGOs in the 1980s, has been negligible and/or symbolic in the region, despite their primary role in agro-forestry. Agarwal (1997:p. 26) attributes this to a range of factors such as women's limited experience in public speaking, illiteracy, a lack of recognized authority, gendered norms and the absence of 'a critical mass' of women in these arrangements. These issues are addressed, as discussed earlier, through the processes by which collectives are constituted and their practices. While addressing issues of unequal access within the village, collective enactment of practices such as planting nurseries and forests has also resulted in the ability to articulate and realize their own understanding of sustainable strategies. For instance, because village

communities and particularly women prefer mixed forest with oak and other broad-leaved species, that are critical for subsistence as they generate fodder and fuel wood, the forests planted by women's collectives are qualitatively different from that of the forest department which are generally commercially profitable pine mono-crops (Agarwal, 2005; Agrawal, 1995).

Agarwal (1997) also notes in the context of both policy and grassroots efforts in different part of the country more broadly, that while greater community control over forest and village commons has been re-established to some extent, 'unlike the old systems of communal property management which recognised the usufruct rights of all villagers, the new ones represent a more formalised system of rights based on membership' (p. 38). Under these new initiatives, 'membership' is replacing 'citizenship' as the defining criterion for establishing rights in the commons'.²² The collectives are distinct in their approach because they assert the place-based, historical and cultural notion of use of forests for subsistence by the entire village community, though not in the language of 'rights' or 'claims'. Instead, constructive politics of women's collectives centred on practices generates the 'village commons' socially and ecologically. Borrowing from Brara (2008), the notion of 'village commons' here 'invokes the time and space of dialogue and sharing' (p. 259) which is inscribed materially through the management of the *balwadis*, in the regeneration and management of forests and water sources, regulation of cattle grazing, collection of fuel wood and fodder; and other

²² Sarin (2001), for instance, also argues that non-governmental organizations and civil society groups, which have played an important role in policy advocacy and in spearheading social movements in Uttarakhand, have largely been co-opted to work as 'private service providers' for the many donor funded projects. Village joint forest management programmes funded by the World Bank, which have the stated objectives of women's empowerment, have ended up marginalizing women's struggles and the informal systems that were a product of these struggles. Based on the assumption that lack of funds is the problem, injection of large sums of project money has created inequities between villages and also led to conflicts over the control of funds in the context of limited opportunities for earning cash incomes.

practices like the use of money collected through savings fund to buy collective goods for use by all households in the village.

Activities such as collective child care through the pre-school centres, generation and management of village commons, are critical sites where tangible benefits have been achieved through organizing. Both men and women point towards tangible changes that have occurred as a consequence of the work of women's collectives in the villages over the years. For instance, improvement in the general cleanliness and hygiene of the villages; rejuvenation of natural water bodies; growth in the forest cover and diversity of the plant species in certain regions; lessening of conflict over fodder and fuel, and cattle grazing; better functioning of schools in certain villages and the naturalisation of social norms around women's participation in weddings, festivals and public spaces.

Section II: From Constructive to Contentious Politics

The political economy of the hill region has changed significantly since the 1980s when the UEEC began its work. The network's constructive program of collective practices and building solidarity is acquiring the character of 'contentious politics' which coincides with the emergence of the Women's Federation as a cohesive, distinct entity from the UEEC. Development interventions by state and non-state actors which emphasize material incentives and time-bound achievement of specific objectives have become widespread, over the last two decades in the State. In this changing context, the various actors within the UEEC network and the women's federation are articulating the principles underpinning their activities and practices explicitly. Their agenda is

expanding from one focussed on a practice-based politics to include articulation of shared interests in relation to these dominant practices. Constructive politics here implies the enactment of political agency through practices which entail iterative engagement between actions and perceptions in a collective framework, and involves co-operation as well as addressing conflicts. Contentious politics, on the other hand has been predominantly understood as the articulation of shared interests to achieve specific outcomes, focussing on an oppositional consciousness that involves the work of boundary formation (McAdam, Tarrow & Tilly, 2001). However, the Women's Federation is able to articulate women's shared interest building on an affirmative politics of organizing everyday practices, through which it was constituted, which draws attention to the how critical consciousness and capacities emerge. This trajectory suggests that 'constructive' and 'contentious' politics fall on a continuum, and whether organizing practices appear as one or another depends on conjunctural factors.

In the current milieu where funding in the development sector is largely attached to prescriptive objectives and measurable time bound outcomes and activities, UEEC is unable to generate resources for an experiential approach to social change. Since 2001, existing pre-school centres have been shut down in many villages and are not being opened in new villages, based on a decision made by UEEC to shut *balwadis* in villages, where state run child-care centres are being opened under the Integrated Child Development Scheme (ICDS). While women do not feel a sense of ownership for the ICDS centres because they are seen as a government institution, they constantly compare its functioning to that of the *balwadi*. They also expect the ICDS centre worker to perform in the same way as the *balwadi* teacher and be accountable to them. To

encourage this exchange, in some villages women have asked the worker to be a part of their monthly meetings.

CBO workers suggest that they have started working with women's collectives more actively, now that the *balwadis* have been closed in many villages. The women's collectives and their practices have gained visibility, and this aids the process of formation of collectives in new villages even in the absence of programmatic interventions by UEEC such as the pre-school centres. Many of the existing collectives are becoming more active as they get integrated into the larger network, and the presence of women leaders within the villages is a significant factor which influences the continuation of collective organizing practices, particularly in the context of declining resources, which means fewer paid CBO workers. These processes, which point towards both the challenges to organizing in the current context, but also to the prominent role women have come to play in organizing which is acting as a counter-balancing factor, have unfolded unevenly in villages that work with different CBOs.

For instance, SEED (Society for Environmental Education and Rural Development) and Jai Nanda Devi Swarojgar Shikshan Sansthan (JANDESH), two of the larger CBOs and a part of the network illustrate the diverse trajectories CBOs have adopted. Both CBOs work in about 60 villages in their respective areas and began their association with UEEC at around the same time. However, they have developed very different styles of functioning. Started by a local school teacher in 1992, SEED's work was centred on environment education and activities like water conservation, afforestation, building nurseries and village sanitation. Women always had significant roles and responsibilities in shaping and implementing the agenda of the organization,

and preference was given to the activities and issues they wanted to engage with in this instance. The distinction between the CBO and the regional federation has blurred over the years, primarily due to the emergence of strong women leaders in the villages. The regional federation of women's collectives in this area is perhaps the most active in the network. Jandesh, in contrast, started as a small set-up in 1996 in Garhwal with the support of UEEC, and over the years, has developed a formal organizational structure with support from various aid agencies and now implements several projects which sometimes have contradictory underpinnings. This means that, unlike SEED which is a more fluid organisation, where the leaders of the women's collectives have a primary role, Jandesh's program areas determined by funding agencies. It has adopted the 'project based' model and the formal procedures of monitoring and documentation which are requisites for working with most donor agencies.

It is noteworthy that CBOs working with the UEEC have declined over the years. Unlike in the early years where UEEC formed its own agenda of organizing in collaboration with the rural collective formations in different parts of the region, now they have to define more sharply the criterion and preferred strategies that are necessary for collaboration. This is because the fluid rural collective formations have largely morphed into organizations with specialized programs and agendas, with increasing national and international resources coming in the region particularly for conservation efforts in the Himalayan region. The starkest example of the divergence between UEEC's organizing efforts and the work of aid agencies was visible in some villages in Chamoli district, where Jandesh facilitates micro-credit self-help groups (SHGs) as a part of their work with another organization. The SHGs are being formed in the same villages where the

women's collectives have been working. In contrast to the SHGs, the UEEC has focussed on inclusion of women from all households in the village in organizing practices, to ensure that the agenda is arrived through a process of negotiation and is not dominated by any particular set of interests. The activists at UEEC believe that SHGs comprising women generally from wealthier households reinforce and aid in reproducing class divisions within the village, counterproductive to their own objective of generating solidarity and co-operation among women.

UEEC activists also recognize, however, that some women do participate in micro-credit programmes, and therefore issues and conflicts surrounding them will be a part of discussions at village and regional meetings. The discussions at village meetings on this issue suggest that women's responses are based on their economic positioning. Access to cash determines the ability of women to participate effectively in micro-credit schemes. Even though hill villages are less stratified in terms of land distribution, households have differential access to cash depending on whether someone is a migrant worker and the kind of employment they are able to secure. The general understanding though is that the *sangathans* are inclusive spaces which are meant for collective activities, whereas participation in the SHGs is subject to economic status of household. In small villages in particular, the creation of a SHG does have an adverse impact on the functioning of the collective. A consensus is not always achieved at these discussions on the merits of micro-credit, but they initiate a process of questioning.

UEEC and CBO workers express their opinions on such polarizing issues, advocating their stance at these meetings, but without laying out the direction of desired change. The primary focus of their intervention is the process of deliberation itself, to

ensure that women from low-income households express their opinions and are a part of the dialogue. This focus on inclusive dialogue becomes clear particularly in the context of issues which emerge through collective deliberations among women, but UEEC activists have an opposing view. For instance, unlike micro-credit schemes which is a consequence of organizational interventions, at the regional meeting some women talked about how they used the money collected in the savings fund for building a temple in the village. UEEC activist suggested that there can be other productive ways of using the money, such as buying school books and uniforms for girls from households who cannot afford them, which generated a debate. The primary mode of engagement at these meetings involves ‘thinking with’ rather than ‘thinking for’, through asking questions, provoking debate and sharing information (Friere, 1973).

However, there is a difference between the response of UEEC activists to the issue of micro-credit and building of a temple by women, as the former is perceived to be in fundamental contradiction with their organizing efforts, whereas the latter is part of on-going negotiations within the network. This difference critically also signals the distinction between contentious and constructive politics from the organizational perspective of UEEC, as it becomes necessary to demarcate the boundary of ‘within’ and ‘without’ in terms of the agendas they work with. Both UEEC and the CBOs in the network are beginning to define more sharply their ideological stance. As an organization, UEEC has consistently circumvented the pitfalls of institutionalisation. They did not establish standard practices and guidelines for village collectives or CBOs to follow and adopted extreme discretion in generating resources for their work. UEEC workers argue that being held accountable to the achievement of pre-figured goals and

projects would constrain their approach that privileges women's experiences. It will create power relationship between the collectives and the UEEC, fundamentally transforming their role, which is of facilitation and awareness generation. UEEC is opposed to the 'public service contractor model' adopted by many NGOs, and have refused to formally take on the role of an implementing agency for delivery of services, or monitoring the work of government institutions (Kudva, 2005; Mitlin, Hickey & Bebbington, 2007; Sharma, 2008; Chottray 2007). Their attempt has been to facilitate conditions under which women can exercise citizenship rights, demand accountability from elected representatives and public officials, and participate in electoral politics. Practices geared towards generating collective consciousness among women, and to some extent the larger village community, laid the foundation for the exercise of collective not just individual citizenship. It is clear that the notion of building a collective consciousness which has been the primary goal of organizing for women within the network influences how they perceive citizenship and approach institutional politics.

In the last two decades village based government institutions have increased significantly, because of the creation of the new State in 2001, and the increased expenditure by the federal government on welfare schemes such as the Mahatma Gandhi Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme and the Integrated Child Development Scheme. Building on their experiences of organizing, women have been mobilizing to demand accountability from government institutions such as child care centres, schools and hospitals. While there is an expectation that the government should provide quality services like education, health care and water as the several mobilizations and campaigns indicate, women resist state control over forest management. In a hamlet in

Almora district for instance, when the head of the elected village council with support of the men submitted an application to the forest department to plant trees in their village forest, the women intervened. They argued that this would facilitate complete control by the forest department, and loss of autonomy in managing and using their own forests. This difference on the issue of control over forests reflects the long history of struggle in the region. While in the earlier years, the presence of the state was primarily experienced through the struggles over control of forests as well as 'lack of development' in the hill region, interactions with government institutions and officials have become a part of the constructive program of the women's collectives and the UMP. The increasing participation of women in electoral politics in the last decade also reflects this change.²³

Women have successfully campaigned to secure effective delivery of services in hospitals, schools, and getting basic amenities like water and electricity. In some villages, women have set up regular monitoring mechanisms like meeting with the teachers in the primary school, once every month or looking at the attendance registers. The discussions at village level meetings now also include concerns about functioning of government institutions. One of these campaigns for instance opposed road construction, as it affected the productivity of farms and cut through water sources. Durga Devi, *gram pradhan* (elected head of the village council) of a village near Karnaprayag says, "All of us protested against the construction of a road to our village, because it would have cut through our farms and also dried up the water sources. We want development for our village but if there are only roads beneath our feet and above

²³ High participation of women also needs to be understood in the context of Uttarakhand, being one of the first states in the country to introduce 50 per cent reservation for women in the village elected councils.

our head then what will we eat. The Sub-Divisional Magistrate came to the village after we camped near his office for two days and admitted that the earlier survey was wrong, and the location of the road was changed.” The federal government’s mid-day meal scheme in primary schools has also met with widespread opposition from women’s collectives. Their opposition stems from the fact that providing meals in the school has adversely affected the quality of education as teachers spend their time organizing the preparation of the meal. Shanti Devi from a village in Dwarahat says, “There is only one teacher in the primary school for all five classes but they are busy feeding children with rice...In the previous academic year, the half yearly exams had started and the children did not even get their books.” As these examples highlight, their campaigns go beyond making claims on the state to attempts at moulding the development agenda according to their needs.

An outline of women’s shared interests is emerging from the seemingly disparate issues around which women have organised and mobilized as they articulate a political agenda more explicitly drawing from their experiences of organizing. The ‘epistemic content of their social struggles’ (McMichael, 2010, p. 1) is becoming more clearly visible as political activism in the institutional sphere is bringing the women’s collectives across the State together in a cohesive way to articulate their agenda. The regional federation in Dwarahat with the support of the other women in the network decided to field a candidate from the UMP in the State Assembly elections of 2007. Through a series of decisions and measures in conducting the campaign, women challenged the ‘normal’ way of doing electoral politics. The federation decided to nominate a woman from a below poverty line household and the resources for the campaign were

generated through contributions from collectives across the state. Practices such as bribing voters with alcohol and money were actively criticised during the campaign. The “Basket” was chosen as the electoral symbol by the women because it represented hill women’s everyday lives –their work within the home and in the fields and forests. The framing of the campaign articulated some of the key principles that have been critical in the practices of the women’s collectives. It highlighted the exclusions embedded in practices which create conditions that make it impossible for women and those not affiliated with political parties to contest on an equal footing. Women had to find ways to overcome the same unjust conditions to mount a campaign which explicitly challenged these conditions. This became possible because of the solidarity which had been cultivated within the network. Even though the UMP candidate did not win the election, their candidate garnered a significant vote share and was approached for support by mainstream party candidates during the national elections three years later (Sharma & Sudarshan, 2010).

The push for active foray into electoral politics came from women leaders in the villages, even though there was scepticism on the issue within the UEEC, as some workers argued that it may compromise the autonomy of the Women’s Federation. As an organization, UEEC has clearly demarcated its position in excluding income generation projects, provision of services and projects that are geared towards specific outcomes more generally, from the ambit of its activities. This becomes the criterion for deciding the CBOs that it can continue to work with, where an agreement on strategies of organizing is critical. On the other hand, differences on issues within the network such as entering the arena of electoral politics are negotiated and discussed. At another

level, while the UEEC is explicitly opposed to the idea of micro-credit groups, women in some villages participate in them, and are also a part of the women's collectives. Their exclusion from the activities of the collective would fundamentally alter the form and purpose of the collectives. The present conjuncture is thus shaping the emerging coherence within the network, reflected in the decisions which explicitly articulate the differences that fall within the realm of negotiation.

CONCLUSION

In its early years, the vision of change offered by the UEEC was guided by the broad framework of ecological sustainability and environmental education, which they sought to realize through experiential strategies and collective learning. As a consequence, concerns which were of particular significance to women's everyday lives gradually became central to organizing practices, as women's capabilities to articulate and act upon issues collectively, strengthened. The organizing efforts of UEEC activists, CBO workers and women leaders, as well as the interactions and activities of women's collectives, suggest a conceptualisation of political agency constructed through an iterative relationship between material practices and a process of reflection. The organizing experiences of CBO workers also show that women were not conceived of as abstracted subjects, but as inhabiting class, caste and gender hierarchies with conflicting interests. Interactions and engagements within the network, between activists and women as well as among women, are attempts to counter these hierarchies which in specific instances have been successful. This suggests that solidarity and the formation of a relational consciousness is an on-going process engendered through enacting practices and negotiations. Analogously, different practices, such as

management of forests and the pre-school centres were not conceived of merely as interventions in contained functional spheres to achieve specific outcomes, but were part of an integrated framework of collective learning.

Thinking and working through practices and experiences thus highlights a relational conception of power and how contingency is constitutive of the political. The various mobilizations by women's collectives highlight an unstable solidarity that is premised on addressing conflicts through historically informed practices, which sometimes crystallises to achieve specific outcomes. Two key areas around which most of the mobilizations have been centred are challenging gender inequality and in demanding accountability from government institutions. The Federation has been able to articulate women's shared interest building on an affirmative politics of organizing everyday practices, evident in the election campaign they mounted in 2007.

The increasing presence of government institutions and development interventions by other non-state actors has imposed constraints on the UEEC and the Women's Federation in two ways. First, there has been a decline in the available resources that are compatible with their focus on practices, as the withdrawal of government funding from the UEEC in 2006 indicates. This has meant fewer workers and withdrawal of activities like the pre-school centres which require monetary support. Second, CBO workers and women leaders are experiencing difficulties in sustaining collective practices in the villages, as women and men increasingly expect material incentives, as the dominant development practices have changed the conceptual and political environment of the hill region significantly over the last two decades. The workers though also point out that the 'movement character' has become stronger, as

women's collectives and their practices are now widely recognized in the region, and an increasing number of women emerge as active leaders in their villages.

Accounts of women leaders and CBO workers suggest that the challenges they encounter in organizing women are different today than when the UEEC began its work. Earlier, resistance to women getting together in a deliberative manner was largely rooted in gendered norms. Inhibitions about travelling outside the village, women's perceptions of themselves as being illiterate and therefore incapable, as well as contextual factors such as women on an average having too many children, difficulties in going to villages inaccessible by road, posed significant challenges for their work. Now, there are concerns about the expectation of material incentives by men and women which makes it difficult to convince them to do collective work. As Basanti Devi president of her collective in Chamoli district says, "When I go for regional meetings, people in my village often tell me that other villages are getting schemes, what do we get? They tell me that you go to Almora for nothing. Women often ask why they should work for free and waste their time, when earlier they cleaned 3kms long path just like that". Sarla Devi from Almora District sitting next to her adds, "This is a problem in all villages, whether it is Kumaon or Garhwal - this thinking has become widespread. Even when there were no women's collectives, people laboured on each other's farms during particular months. Now they want money for every hour of labour".

CBO workers and women leaders attribute this thinking to the way development interventions of government and NGOs are structured, which impedes their own efforts. Most CBO workers make a distinction between what they do and the work of other NGOs based on their long-term personal relationships with people in the villages. In

contrast, they argue that 'outsiders' who come in to implement projects or perform a job have to work with money or other incentives because it is not possible for them to establish such relationships in a short span of time. Their position resonates with scholarship on development practices of state and non-state institutions which suggest that interventions that use the terminology of 'capacity building', 'empowerment' and 'participation', work with a pre-determined agenda that not only excludes certain choices but also ways of collective imagining and enacting that focus on process (Li, 2007; Feldman, 2003; Cooke & Kothari, 2001; Mohan & Hickey, 2005). The reflections of women leaders also correspond with a Gramscian understanding of critical awareness which involves seeing different conceptions of the world in relation to each other. The struggle to engender such critical awareness and the struggles that follow based on such critical awareness, suggest a political realm where boundaries are continuously shifting, challenging the distinction between dominance and resistance.

Thus far, the Women's Federation has not projected a unified politics to achieve a common goal but the objectives of contingent mobilizations at the village and regional level are achieved by drawing on solidarity and support from the network, which strengthens collectives locally and women as individuals. Whether a more consolidated and official agenda will emerge in the future and the form it might take is unclear, but the transformatory potential of organizing has emerged from an approach that privileges women's experiences and everyday work. This approach to organizing while embedded in a politics that challenges unequal gender relations, and advocates equitable socio-ecological relations for sustainable livelihoods, is critically based on an understanding among workers, activists and women leaders within the network, that the

experiential collective learning process which involves struggles and negotiations should not be marginalized.

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