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‘Suddenly you are told that you are leaders.’

*The framing of leadership among members of
feminist NGOs in New Delhi.*

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Abstract

Leadership is often proposed as a key solution for social change, although the actual meaning remains unclear. By studying leadership in the context of Indian feminist NGOs' *hybridity*, situated in-between Western structures and the values of the Indian Women's Movement, I intended to deepen our understanding of the lived meaning of leadership and followership, beyond its *buzzword* character. Through an embedded single-case study of the feminist NGO circle in New Delhi, using semi-structured interviews, I explored how leadership is framed by their members, and what this implies for their everyday leadership experiences. In a cross-case analysis, I found that the members' leadership frames were mostly positive, yet contradictory. Their frames, influenced by feminist thought, emphasised agency by seeing everyone as a leader of their own life. However, they also applied more conventional understandings of leadership that acknowledge their group context and ascribe more power to the leader. The members highlighted their feminist identity by speaking about *feminist* leadership. I argued that the accelerating process of *NGOisation* hinders this aspirational concept to flourish. By strengthening feminist leadership in theory and practice, especially examining followers' roles in the process, I hope that we will inspire others to lead and follow like feminists.

Key words

Buzzword; Feminism; Feminist leadership; Feminist NGOs; Framing; India; Leadership; New Delhi; NGOisation; WPR

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As you enter positions of trust and power,
dream a little before you think.

Toni Morrison

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Acronyms

CLS	Critical leadership studies
CSR	Centre for Social Research (India)
GIZ	Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit
FL	Feminist leadership
IWM	Indian Women's Movement
MLS	Mainstream leadership studies
MOOC	Massive Open Online Course
M4ID	Marketing 4 International Development
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
RQ	Research question
SAWF	South Asian Women's Fund
WPR	What's the Problem Represented to be

Abbreviations

e.g.	<i>exempli gratia</i> (for example)
et al.	<i>et alii</i> (and others)
f.	<i>folio</i> (and the following page)
ff.	<i>folio</i> (and the following pages)
ibid.	<i>ibidem</i> (in the same place)
i.e.	<i>id est</i> (that is/means)
n.d.	no date
s.v.	<i>sub verbo</i> (under the word)

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1 Introduction: approaching the new in-word of social change

Faced with a multitude of issues we do not know how to handle, from environmental crises to conflict, war, and oppression, one of the answers given over and over again is the call for better and stronger leaders. As Tourish (2014:79) writes, it does not matter if we talk about business failure or climate change: 'better leadership' is seen as a panacea. Politicians, social movement actors, and scholars alike state that 'we cannot succeed without the leadership of the strong' (Annan, 2005) and that 'in our world the need for leadership is more now than ever before' (Kotter, 2010). The pile of research on leadership is large and continues to grow¹; countless management courses for 'leadership skills' are offered.² In the world of development practice, we find online courses on 'leadership for global responsibility' (GIZ, 2014)³, 'leadership challenges' (Nudge, 2015)⁴, and efforts to 'build young feminist leadership' (SAWF, 2014).⁵ Leadership has become the in-word of social change.

In leadership studies, there has been a *post-heroic turn*: The previous leader-centric perspectives of leadership, studying the traits and behaviours of those in charge, searching for the best possible ways of being a leader, have slowly given way towards a more holistic understanding. Leadership is now often viewed as a social process, co-constructed by leaders and followers alike (Contractor *et al.*, 2012; Fairhurst & Uhl-Bien, 2012).

A closer look at the depiction of leadership in the development and social change context, however, shows that this turn has not yet taken place in practice: Annan (2005, emphasis mine) speaks about the '*leadership of the strong, and the engagement of all*'; Nudge's (2015) 'leadership challenge' is a

¹ There are journals dedicated to leadership studies, e.g. *Leadership Quarterly* or *Leadership and Organization Development*, alongside specific postgraduate courses at universities, such as a *Master of Science in Leadership* at

² See e.g. *Centre for Creative Leadership* (www.ccl.org), *Dale Carnegie Training* (www.dalecarnegie.com), *Aktivt Ledarskap* (www.aktivtledarskap.se), or *GE India's Leadership Programs* (2015).

³ Launched in 2014, the first Massive Open Online Course (MOOC) the German development agency, *Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit* (GIZ), offered was called 'Leadership for Global Responsibility' (GIZ, 2014). Mixing management with social change, World Bank Institute's (2012) *Greater than Leadership* and Aspen's (2015) *India Leadership Initiative*, are just two further examples of leadership seeping into the world of development practice.

⁴ Especially appealing are apparently global leadership development initiatives focusing on youth, women, or, best, young women. Apart from the *Nudge Leadership Challenge* (2015), other examples are +Acumen's MOOCs (www.plusacumen.org) and Women Deliver's (2015) *Young Leaders Program*. Apart from their audience and global focus, they also have massive corporate funding in common, further allowing the fusion of business and development.

⁵ The example of SAWF, the South Asian Women's Fund, is again just one amongst many: the Ford Foundation (2015) writes that it 'supports visionary leaders and organizations on the frontlines of social change worldwide', and the Global Fund for Women (2015) states that 186 of the projects they fund contribute to 'leadership development.'

competition to seek out the 'most resilient, adaptable and connected young Global Leaders'; for 'building young feminist leadership', SAWF (2014) invites proposals to boost individuals' skills to turn them into leaders. The promotion of leadership in development is thus less interested in a mutual process of collective change and more concerned with enabling individuals to exercise power over others with more efficacy, establishing hierarchies and creating new elites.

Feminism has been traditionally wary of elites, hierarchies, and power inequalities (Kumar, 1993:3; Jagori, 2004:50). Having begun as a women's liberation project, dismantling the inherent power dynamics between women and men (Porter, 1999:3f.), feminist theory and practice has since become more *intersectional*, acknowledging different kinds of socially constructed identities and hierarchies built on ethnicity, class, sexual orientation, age, body abilities or size, etc. (Lykke, 2010:85; Mohanty, 1991:3ff.). Feminists aspire to ways to exert power in a transformative way, to be as inclusive and as mindful of structural inequalities as possible (Alpízar Durán, 2007:5; Bhasin & Khan, 1986:5). Maiguashca (2014:86) argues feminist activists practice 'principled pragmatism': 'although highly principled in the sense that they are driven by a commitment to radical social change and gender justice, [they] are also highly pragmatic in the way they pursue these goals.' With this attitude, they can potentially transform the way leadership is understood and practised.

A place that seems predestined to explore this, are feminist non-governmental organisations (NGOs)⁶ in the Global South. Depending on (foreign) funding, they apply Western organisational structures as requested by their funders, yet are also accountable to the social movement⁷ they have emerged from (Choudry & Kapoor, 2010:1f.). They are forced to be 'principled pragmatics'. This is particularly apparent in the case of Indian feminist NGOs where the Indian Women's Movement (IWM) clearly articulates its critique in academia, (social) media, and activist circles (Kumar, 1995:75; Roy, 2015). Simultaneously, the shrinking funding for women's rights (Arutyunova & Clark, 2013; SAWF, 2012:20) puts more and more pressure on the NGOs to interact with donors and fulfil their requests. For their understanding and practice of leadership, this means that Indian feminist NGOs are both exposed to Western ideas while at the same time they carry with them the egalitarian aspirations of the IWM. How is leadership understood and framed in such a context? Do

⁶ *NGO* encompasses a wide range of diverse organisations, although they are often viewed as a 'unified phenomenon' (Bernal & Grewal, 2014:20). For this thesis, I follow PRIA (2003:2) and define NGOs as 'institutional identities' that are private, not-for-profit, and self-governed. In this thesis, I use 'NGO' and 'organisation' interchangeably.

⁷ For *social movement*, a term with diverse definitions just as NGOs, I suggest Snow et al.'s (2004:6) reading: movements are a form of 'collective or joint action', have 'change-oriented goals or claims', act at least to some extent outside institutions, have 'some degree of organisation', as well as 'some degree of temporal continuity'.

some narratives dominate the others, or do they create new, hybrid frames to make sense of the world? What does leadership mean to the NGO members and what does it imply?

1.1 Purpose and research questions

The purpose of this research is to explore and analyse how leadership is framed by members of feminist NGOs in New Delhi, in semi-structured single and group interviews. By investigating how leadership is conceptualised in the context of the NGOs' *hybridity*, situated in-between Western structures and the IWM, and what this framing implies for their experiences of leading and following in their organisational contexts, I aim to add to and deepen our academic and activist understanding of the lived meaning of (feminist) leadership – and followership.

Studying how leadership is framed and the potential implications is important for two reasons that are interlinked. Firstly, while leadership is often proposed as a key solution, especially in the context of development practice, it remains unclear what is actually meant. We act upon a word without fully grasping the meaning we apply to it, leading to actions that might not be aligned with our proposed intentions and values. Secondly, since in the context of development practice and social change we often aim for an equality-based and power-conscious perspective on leadership, it is particularly important to better understand this buzzword.⁸

I take the embedded case of feminist NGOs in New Delhi because for one, situated in the capital, they are directly involved with and 'seen' both by actors from the development context and the IWM. Secondly, they are a confined (and small) group and maintain strong ties as a network, which allows an analysis of influential communicative processes between them. Finally, the case of New Delhi's feminist NGO circle involves both organisations that are directly engaged in leadership development projects and those that are not, potentially further diversifying the experiences.

Bearing in mind the implicit vagueness of the term leadership, it is less useful to carve out the exact meaning and more important to understand how people *frame* it, i.e. how they instantly categorise and evaluate it, and how they choose to present it when they use the word.

⁸ Buzzwords, a term coined by Cornwall & Eade (2010), are words that are sufficiently vague to allow very different interpretations, adequately ominous, to leave the exact definition to 'experts' and tendentially positive, to perk people up just by using them. Examples of development buzzwords are *participation*, *empowerment*, and, as I argue, *leadership*. In chapter 4.1, I will explore buzzwords more in detail.

Thus, the research questions (RQs) are:

1. How is leadership framed among members of feminist NGOs in New Delhi?
2. What does their framing imply for their experience of leadership processes in their organisations and the feminist NGO circle?

1.2 Outline

I divide this paper into seven parts. In the next chapter (2), I explore the ideological context of the feminist organisations, before taking the reader on a theoretical excursion (3) to mainstream leadership studies and their critiques, followed by a presentation of this thesis' theoretical framework (4). I then lay open my methodological choices (5), and subsequently analyse and discuss the findings of the study (6), linking back to the original RQs, culminating in concluding remarks for future research and action (7).

2 Setting the scene: feminist organising in India

The Indian feminist movement is today one of the most sophisticated in the world. It is time for us to build on that.

Radha Kumar (1993:196)

Before setting out to discuss the theoretical foundations of this study, we first need a sense for the place these organisations are situated in. I start with an overview of the trajectory of the Indian feminist movement until today, followed by a closer look at the situation of feminist NGOs and their socio-political context.

2.1 Situating the contemporary Indian feminist movements

The contemporary Indian Women's Movement (IWM)⁹ came into being in the 1970s, as the promise of gender equality made in the Constitution from 1949 appeared to be a sham (Kumar, 1993:1). Driven by the Indian Left, it has historically been divided in two main fields, the party-affiliated groups and the autonomous ones (i.e. those without any external funding) (Omvedt,

⁹ Although the country as well as its movements are large and diverse, and not in the slightest homogeneous, I intentionally refer to the Indian Women's Movement in singular when using the acronym IWM, to capture the to a certain degree shared identity of campaigning for women's rights (Agnew, 1997; Gandhi & Shah, 1992). Furthermore, I write about the Indian *Women's* Movement, and not the feminist, as the origin of contemporary feminist organisations is in the IWM, the autonomous part in particular, and not an outspoken, self-identified feminist part of it. See Kumar (1993; 1995) for deeper analyses of the varied streams of the movement.

1990:182; Roy, 2015:104). The 1970s saw explicit feminist campaigning:¹⁰ protests against dowry and rape were the first to unify feminists across the entire country to advocate for legislation changes (Kumar, 1995:64ff.). This proved to be only partially successful, generating massive public support but unsatisfying political response (*ibid.*).

The 1980s were more a time of direct action, building women's centres for legal, medical, and psychological support (*ibid.*:73). The centres were founded in the name of sisterhood, exemplified by the name choices such as *Saheli* (female friend), and a re-invention of Indian traditions and particularly Hindu mythology, such as celebrating the goddess Kali.¹¹ Overall, the movement has evolved from caring for suffering women to asserting women's role as productive members of society, towards focusing on self-determination and women's right to decide for their own lives (Kumar, 1993:3). Taking self-determination further, a key theme in today's Indian feminism is *choice*, as scrutinised in a recent Vogue-sponsored women's right campaign video clip, starring famous Bollywood actress Deepika Padukone, citing a poem written by a man, directed by a man (Kamei, 2015).

Most feminist groups today exist in cities; further aggravated by the particularly successful spread of the feminist movement into journalism and academia, and today in social media, while only one quarter of the population in India have Internet access (M4ID, 2014), this leads to the accusation of forming a detached intellectual elite (Kishwar, 1990:44; Rege, 1998:211; Sen, 1994:201). Over the years, feminist organising became not only a large-scale representation issue. From the autonomous women's movement's perspective, three aspects matter in particular: Firstly, feminist structures call for a reflective debate of fundamental issues such as whether men should be included or not (Omvedt, 1990:182), or how decisions will be made, preferably non-hierarchically (Agnew, 1997:12; Sekhon, 1999:35). Secondly, emotions need to be considered and must not get lost in strategic planning efforts (Kumar, 1993:3).¹² Thirdly, structures must offer a connection to the

¹⁰ The term *feminism* arrived in India in the 1970s (Chitnis, 1988:9). While it faces opposition worldwide, as TIME's suggestion for the banishment of the word demonstrates (Steinmetz, 2014), it has a couple additional nuances in India, such as the question whether feminism, as it is a term coming from the West, is compatible with post-colonial thought (Chaudhuri, 2004:xv). For a fervent refusal of the term in the Indian context, see Kishwar (1990). Following Kumar (1995:64), with feminist campaigning I here refer to activist work concentrating on women's issues by self-identified feminists.

¹¹ This also relates to a typical Indian feminist entanglement, between seeking gender equality and the abolition of sex-based differentiations on the one side, and celebrating the feminine and ostensibly female characteristics such as gentleness and caring on the other (Kumar, 1993:3).

¹² As Abha from Jagori (2004:45) remarks: 'it wasn't that we did less [before the institutionalisation]! Anger was very visible. Sometimes now it seems like it is outside of you... there it was totally from the bottom of my stomach, my gut, my uterus.'

bigger movement: 'without a space like [a national conference] how do you feel the realness of being part of a movement?' (Jagori, 2004:45). This becomes even more critical with increasing institutionalisation, which we turn to now.

2.2 Institutionalising feminism in India

The 1990s in India are known as the 'decade of globalisation', as in this time, structural adjustment programmes, market-based reforms, and the influx of donor money and influence drastically changed the country's economic and social foundations (John, 2002). The institutionalisation of the IWM – the transformation of the formerly autonomous women's groups into funded NGOs – took also place over this time, partially driven by the sheer availability of funds and by, as Roy (2011:589) suspects, a 'general exhaustion with movement-based mobilization'.

Indian feminist NGOs did not evolve as 'global soup kitchens' (Fowler, 1994), merely acting as service providers replacing the state,¹³ but rather as 'democratic watchdogs' (Norman, 2014) and took on the role of advocates for social change, influenced by and accountable to both their funders and the IWM. IWM members suspect NGOs follow a 'public service contractor' model (Robinson, 2013) where the skill to write successful funding proposals and to fulfil the requests of their funders are valued higher than commitment to the cause, which remains the aspiration of the radical autonomous core, still seen as the ideological authority (Roy, 2011:589). According to Menon (2004:220), NGOs have gained so much substantial power, that they are the ones who set the agenda for the IWM and not these autonomous women's groups; this fear is shared worldwide, as Kamat (2004:158) warns that the expansion of NGOs is not only a challenge for the state but also for civil society. Reading Murayama's (2009) analysis of how NGOs are depicted, one gets the impression 'NGO' has become a derogatory term in the IWM.

On a personal level, those involved in NGOs nowadays in India are often seen as 'career feminists' indicating intergenerational tension, as most NGO workers are young women while the critique comes from the women's groups of the 1980s, hence older women (Sunder Rajan, 2003:31). Indian feminist NGOs are staffed with highly educated professionals, mostly women (Mitra, 2010:67). As formal education increasingly becomes a barrier in NGOs, this becomes a class issue, too, since mostly upper-/middle-class women (and men) have access to higher education (Deshpande, 2006; Menon, 2006:42). This leads us to the last apparent and important influence on NGOs: the wider socio-political context.

¹³ For more on this reading of NGOs, see Kudva (2005).

2.3 Socio-cultural hierarchies as backdrop

According to Chitnis (1988:11), hierarchies are deeply entrenched in Indian society, with different layers working simultaneously, such as age, gender, profession, and kinship. An important category we have seen already is age, as the generational divide in the IWM is part of a pattern of patriarchal family dynamics, with elders' voices counting more (CREA *et al.*, 2007:22).¹⁴ These hierarchies are rarely expressed as oppressive but usually framed in a positive light, as the oath of Delhi schoolboys shows: 'I solemnly pledge that I shall always extend due regard and respect to women and desist from violent behaviour of any kind against them...' (Anand, 2015). This pledge not only implies that women need protection and are at the mercy of seemingly stronger men. It is also in line with other stories of oppression retold: Gandhi called Dalits, members of the lowest caste, *Harijans* ('Children of God'); women, especially virgins and wives, are depicted to be more virtuous and closer to God in Hinduism, and that their ability to suffer is a sign of strength (Chitnis, 1988:16; Kumar, 1993:2; Sharma, 2010:203f.).

While these notions are challenged by Indian feminists, they do not condemn hierarchies altogether (Kishwar, 1990:42). To tackle the accuse of Westernisation, Indian feminists often in fact accentuate their 'Indianness', by celebrating traditions and the collectivist society where compromise is preferred to confrontation (Chitnis, 1988:23f.; Sunder Rajan, 1998:324). As their egalitarian aspirations blend with hierarchical traditions, it further complicates the definition of core Indian feminist values. With this multi-layered image of the IWM in mind, I now turn to the core concept of this thesis, leadership.

3 A theoretical excursion: what has been written about leadership before?

Leadership, as we experience it, is a continuous social process.
Richard Barker (2001:472)

Leadership studies have evolved into a flourishing research field with 'various clusters of theories and approaches' (Fernandez, 2005:200). However, little attention has been given to 'problematizing leadership' (Bryman, 2004:757). Nevertheless, to understand the background of the themes discussed in this thesis, it is useful to make a little detour by asking how scholars have

¹⁴ For more on how the layers of patriarchy in Indian families play out in feminist circles, see Krishan (2015).

conceptualised and studied leadership, starting with ideas stemming from the 'mainstream' leadership studies (MLS), moving further to critical leadership studies (CLS), and finishing with critical foundations for feminist leadership (FL).

3.1 Mainstream leadership studies: desiring strong men, dreaming better futures

A 40-year old quote captures the current sentiment in leadership research immaculately: 'if leadership is bright orange, leadership research is slate grey' (McCall & Lombardo, 1978:3 *cited in* Kelly, 2014:190). Leadership scholars, be it those glorifying (e.g. Bass, 1990; Burns, 1978) or criticising it (Gemmill & Oakmill, 1992; Wood, 2005), are drawn to this concept. Despite its vagueness, it apparently offers a mythical glow that makes it worth chasing to capture it, no matter how futile the attempt.

The vast majority of leadership studies focus implicitly on how to be a 'good' leader, however they define it (Sliwa *et al.*, 2013:861). For leadership, one apparently needs a person acting as a leader, a 'great man'.¹⁵ It is assumed that leaders should and are able to motivate (read: manipulate) followers towards organisational goals and hence are believed to possess more influence and power on the outcomes than their subordinates (Barker, 2001:473f.).

Since there are a myriad of different leader-centred concepts and theories, it is surprising how little is written and thought about the majority of people involved in the process: the followers. Before Kelley's (1988) controversial paper 'In Praise of Followers' on different follower styles, the topic was virtually nowhere to be found. Research on followers has become a proper stream in MLS, yet it still remains often overlooked, especially in organisational research (Carsten *et al.*, 2010; Crossman & Crossman, 2011).

I want to present four different leader-centred concepts that are important in the context of Indian feminist organisations: *Weber's* leadership typology, and the *transformational*, *servant*, and *nurturant-task* leadership styles.

Weber (1925:122ff.) divides into three types of leadership, namely *traditional* (inherited, like kings), *legall/rational* (bureaucratic or appointed, such as business managers and politicians), and *charismatic* (inspiring people due to personal traits, e.g. Jesus – or many social movement leaders).

¹⁵ The vast majority of historical treaties on individual leaders are about men (Andrews *et al.*, 2010:10).

The typology enjoys popularity until today, with Spary (2007) using it to determine pathways into power by female politicians in India.

Leadership is not only about strong men but also the promise of a better future, which is why the *transformative leadership style* is one of the most researched and popular ones. Coined by Burns (1978), it can be understood as leading based on personal convictions and values, such as authenticity or justice, with the aim to influence the followers not only to act towards a shared goal but also to change their beliefs accordingly (Humphries & Einstein, 2003:87).

A related concept is the *servant leadership style*. In MLS connected with Greenleaf (1970), it has ancient rules, as e.g. 'an Indian scholar in 4th Century B.C. wrote, "the king [leader] is a paid servant and enjoys the resources of the state together with the people"' (Mittal & Dorfman, 2012:555). The emphasis in servant leadership is on humans' intrinsic motivation to be of service to one another (*ibid.*). Servant leadership has different components that are weighed differently across cultures. E.g. a focus on *egalitarianism* and *empowering others* is stronger across European cultures, yet the *empathy* and *humility* dimensions are most endorsed by Southern Asian cultures, including India (*ibid.*).

This finding also highlights that while the vast majority of leadership research are produced in the West, they do not necessarily hold true for other cultures (de Ver, 2008; Dickson et al., 2012; House, 1995). The only model developed in the Indian context is Sinha's (1995) *nurturant-task leadership style*, assuming that leaders are warm, considerate, and take care of their followers, as long as those fulfil their tasks (Palrecha et al., 2012:149).

Finally, when it comes to literature on leadership in development, the picture is even bleaker. Neither do MLS take development issues into account, nor do development studies pay particular attention to leadership issues. The latter seemingly attach more importance to structural issues than the role of individual agency – an issue at odds with the on-going individualisation in development *practice* (Miller et al., 2013:42) – and the former usually concentrate on Western businesses and have consequently transformed leadership into an apolitical concept (de Ver, 2008). If the term is used, e.g. as a module of capacity development, it is often done in a superficial, leader-centred manner (e.g. Lopes & Theison, 2003:35). The few development leadership researchers (Andrews et al., 2010; de Ver, 2008; Leftwich, 2010) hence recommend shifting from persona to process – which brings us to CLS.

3.2 Critical leadership studies: leading as a process

Proponents of CLS see leadership as a *relational process*, often surrounding the making of meaning (Sutherland *et al.*, 2014:2). The emphasis is here on how the tasks of leadership – often understood as exerting influence – can be shared among the team members (Wang *et al.*, 2014). Yet here again, more is written about the act of leading (e.g. decision-making, coordinating, envisioning, taking initiative, or influencing people) than following: what constitutes following in a fluid understanding of leadership? Could this be the reaction to the manipulation, the implementation of the vision, is it listening when someone speaks?

CLS accrue from a sentiment that leadership is a ‘convenient social myth’ (Barker, 2001:471) to support the existing social order, a ‘social defence whose central aim is to repress uncomfortable needs, emotions, and wishes that emerge when people attempt to work together’ (Gemmill & Oakley, 1992:114). However, conceptualising leadership as a process may actually *conceal* power inequalities, as everyone appears to participate in the process (see e.g. Uhl-Bien, 2006:662). Power has to be questioned and acknowledged - which is where FL comes in.

3.3 Feminist perspectives on leadership: between critique and praise

Whereas CLS have started to influence MLS, FL remains a widely neglected topic, especially in academia. In fact, Batliwala's (2011) working paper on FL, arguably the most conclusive analysis written so far, is published by an Indian feminist organisation – and not an academic institution. Although it is not possible to speak about FL *Studies* (yet), as little diverging research has been conducted so far, some core commonalities as well as different directions can be detected.

Discussions of FL often start with a critique of MLS, pointing to barriers, such as the *glass ceiling*, that hinder women in becoming leaders and managers¹⁶, the fact that most leadership studies were written by men on men (Batliwala, 2011:18), and to the *masculinised leader model* of competitive, self-reliant heroes (Binns, 2008). They do not conclude, however, to abolish leadership altogether but rather twist or transform it. Especially in Indian feminist literature, it is emphasised that hierarchies in themselves are not problematic, let alone leadership (Jagori, 2004:68; Kishwar, 1990:42; Menon, 2007).

¹⁶ See e.g. Eagly & Johannesen-Schmidt (2001), for a general overview, and CSR (2009) for India-specific information. For more on women in leadership, see e.g. Fletcher (2003).

What virtually all models of FL have in common is the acknowledgement of three core aspects of feminism: *purpose*, *principles*, and *power*. Feminist critique, and hence FL, is never seen as a mere descriptive but an openly normative project: 'Feminist leadership [is] oriented to a different arrangement of the human order: /.../ Changing economic and social structures, beginning with transformation of psychic structures. Bridging personal freedom with collective freedom' (Admira, *n.d.*). The aim of FL is to enable people – of all genders – to lead on the basis of feminist values such as social equality (*principles*) to bring forward a feminist social change (*purpose*). This links back to the 'mainstream' *transformative leadership style*, which is popular among FL scholars and practitioners (e.g. Batliwala & Friedman, 2014).

When discussing *power*, MLS and CLS only touch upon it, yet in FL it *dominates* the discussion. There are plenty of different theories of power that inform feminist research; four aspects that are particularly often mentioned and discussed regarding FL are how power is *expressed* (power over, under, to, with, within), where it is *situated* (public/private), how it is *used* (direct, indirect, hidden), and different types of *authority* (assigned, earned, positional) (Batliwala, 2011:40). Just as leadership is not seen entirely negative, so is power viewed as a potentially productive and positive force – when used mindfully and with critical self-awareness, and with the aim to redistribute it towards all those involved and subjected to it (Admira, *n.d.*).

These two last aspects, self-awareness and redistribution of power, are crucial because they point into two slightly diverging directions in FL. There is on the one hand the perspective that leadership is about each and every individual's ability 'to live their lives as they choose' (Menon, 2007:111), or, as Crater (1976, *cited in* Batliwala, 2011:25) writes, a 'process of building confidence /.../ so that others will attempt leadership themselves.' In their FL model, Batliwala & Friedman's (2014:32) accentuate how the self influences leadership yet ignore the group context. Leadership here is hardly to be distinguished from agency, another concept popular in feminism, defined as one's ability to make independent choices, critically aware of what might limit them (Gero, 2014:34).

For others, however, this is only the first step of FL: 'first, building women's self-esteem in order to strengthen their leadership, and second, giving women the skills, resources, and access to decision making which would enable them to have more power to make a difference in their own communities. In other words, leadership for change' (Antrobus, 1999:39). FL thus involves the work within a group, redistributing power in society, starting with personal social relationships: 'for

feminist leaders, good leadership is about relationship-building – within their organizations, with their constituencies, and with both allies and opponents' (Batliwala, 2011:66).

What remains missing in the FL concept is the follower perspective. If leadership were only a fancy word for agency, if everyone were *only* seen as leaders of themselves, this would not matter. Yet as leadership is perceived as relational, the vacuum on the side of those subjected to FL is problematic. To better understand what FL is about, women leaders have been asked how they understand and practice it, rather than all the other people involved in their work (e.g. Bordas, 2012; Fine, 2009; Hartmann, 1999). Emphasis is given on how to avoid *Founder's Syndrome* – the holding on to power of organisation's founders or long-term members (Block & Rosenberg, 2002) – and how to enable future (young) leaders (CREA *et al.*, 2007:25). This means, at some point, these people must have been in non-leader positions. In fact, since FL also refers to leading groups, there are plenty of situations where someone has to follow someone who leads, and be it just by listening to a proposal or asking a question. How people *follow* towards social transformation remains undiscussed.

3.4 Concluding the excursion

As we have seen from this short theoretical excursion, leadership is a highly researched concept, remaining an enigmatic phenomenon nonetheless: MLS tend to concentrate on personalities, styles, and behaviours of leaders, thus individualising leadership and consolidating dualistic, hierarchical positions of leaders and followers. Due to CLS, there has been a post-heroic turn in MLS, investigating leadership more often from a relational process perspective, downplaying hierarchies and power. FL adds to the discussion by putting emphasis on power and feminist principles and the goal of social transformation, overlooking the role of followers. All these research streams remain captivated by the 'bright orange' (McCall & Lombardo, 1978:3) of leadership, unable to fully grasp it in all its facets. This leads us to the next step on this research journey, how such a *buzzword* is theorised.

4 Framing a buzzword: a theoretical framework

In their first year at university, all students should have a mandatory course in linguistic manipulation. There is nothing new about the use and misuse of words, images, similes, and metaphors in shaping the way we think, act, formulate hypotheses, and assess evidence. But the intensity with which modern communications bombard our senses has reached such a pitch that we need to develop skills of resistance.

Guy Standing (2010:53)

After visiting leadership studies, I now turn to the theoretical fundament of this thesis. I combine four concepts, namely *buzzwords*, feminist NGOs' *hybridity*, their *communicative processes*, and *framing analysis*. They build together the theoretical framework of this study.

4.1 On buzzwords and their (mis-)use for social change

According to popular dictionary definitions, a *buzzword* is either an 'important-sounding usually technical word or phrase often of little meaning used chiefly to impress laymen' or a 'vogueish word' (Merriam Webster, 2015, s.v. 'buzzword'). In the context of development practice¹⁷, the term was coined rather recently by Cornwall & Eade (2010). They build, amongst others, on Sachs' (1992) 'Development Dictionary' and Pörksen's (1989) analysis of 'plastic words' – modular language, which can be interchanged easily and lack any substantial meaning (van der Laan, 2001:349).

While development¹⁸ buzzwords are, ironically, only vaguely defined in the articles published in Cornwall & Eade's (2010) groundbreaking anthology, four key qualities of them become apparent. Buzzwords are, firstly, *fashionable terms*, used comparatively often in development practice and being subject to change. Secondly, they are *vague* and *broad*, not well defined, allowing diverging interpretations. Yet all these interpretations have in common that, thirdly, they give one a 'buzz,' that they *have a positive meaning*. Finally, their broadness makes them also *susceptible to being left to experts*.¹⁹

¹⁷ While Cornwall & Eade (2010) speak about the 'development industry' to refer to the conglomeration of actors involved in 'doing development' in an institutionalised, managerial manner (Lewis, 2010) – from the UN to national aid agencies and national governments and NGOs of any size. I write instead about *development practice*, in order to emphasise the practical notion of the domain, as opposed to the other institutionalised field that is equally criticised by feminists, namely academia (Hodžić, 2014:239f.).

¹⁸ *Development* can be understood as a buzzword itself (Rist, 2010).

¹⁹ Building on Escobar (2011:45), in feminist circles, *expert* is both a contested *term* (who counts as an expert and who 'only' as a person 'who speak[s] and act[s] on their own behalf' (Choudry & Shragge, 2011:508?)) and *profession* (according to Fraser (2009:114), 'a strange shadowy version of [feminist activism]') (Ferguson, 2014; Kothari, 2005).

The use of buzzwords in development has serious implications. Take *participation*, a buzzword in fashion since the late 1980s (Leal, 2010): who would *not* want people to ‘participate’ in their development? Yet virtually everything can be checked off as having sought ‘participation’, even the mere attendance in policy-planning meetings (White, 1996). Buzzwords are therefore vulnerable to being co-opted (Batliwala, 2010). Words can also become so technicalised (like *gender mainstreaming*), that they are inaccessible for lay-people (Smyth, 2007). Buzzwords form the dominant development discourse, sanitised and deprived of actual meaning, vulnerable to any innocuous interpretation by those in power (Wilson, 1992:10).

A word that has been curiously overlooked in the buzzword discourse so far is *leadership*. It has all the characteristics to qualify as a buzzword: it is *en vogue* – with a wide range of development funding agencies and foundations asking for leadership projects (Miller *et al.*, 2013:18ff.). Secondly, the word is sufficiently broad – as evidenced by the diverse and massive research body discussed in Chapter 3. Thirdly, it is equipped with the necessary buzz – celebrated even by activist-scholars acclaiming ‘revolutionary leadership’ (Watkins, 2012) or grassroots empowerment projects promising cryptic ‘inside-out leadership’ (5th Space, 2015).

However, leadership also differs from the development buzzwords mentioned before: leadership, as ‘sexy’ as it sounds, also conjures images of elites, hierarchies, and power. These issues are not necessarily seen as positive, especially in feminist circles (Alpízar Durán, 2007:5; Chávez & Griffin, 2009; Rowe, 2009). Furthermore, whereas *participation* calls for collective action and the ‘power of the people’, *leadership* is individualising and hence pointing into a different direction (see 3.3). Before exploring what this new buzzword then implies for development and social change, we need to get a better idea of the setting where I investigate the use of it: Indian feminist NGOs.

4.2 The hybridity of Southern feminist NGOs

Over the last decades, the research interest in NGOs, especially in the global South, has skyrocketed. This is often explained by the vital role NGOs play in development practice, serving as an intermediary between the paying ‘partners’, the governments in the North, and the ‘end-

users', people in the South. The sector has experienced a tremendous growth over the last thirty years, with an estimated 2 million NGOs in India alone (Mahapatra, 2014).²⁰

In feminist literature, an overwhelming majority criticise the 'NGO boom' (Alvarez, 1999), accusing NGOs of a de-politicising impact on civil society: they appear to set a watered-down social change agenda due to their donor dependencies (Choudry & Kapoor, 2013; Jad, 2010; Lang, 2000). What is often overlooked is what this says about the challenging composition of (Southern) NGOs. They are set in hierarchical and bureaucratic structures required or inspired by development practice yet are tied to their political origin, the social movements, through values and aspirations. They are hence dubbed bastards, unwanted children of mother movement's illicit affair with father capitalism (Hodžić, 2014:238).²¹ To grasp their *hybridity*, it is valuable to first comprehend who the 'parents' of NGOs are.

Development cooperation is rapidly changing, with new actors from the private sector joining the traditional ones, i.e. states and international organisations (Arutyunova & Clark, 2013:42). Yet this rather adds to the economic growth paradigm and the use of Western business models that dominate development practice (Clark *et al.*, 2006:16). Those who seek funding, follow suit: they use conventional monitoring systems because 'donors require it' (Batliwala & Pittman, 2010:8), adopt specific 'NGO terminology' such as mission statements (Craig & Porter, 2006), or install bureaucratic structures to ensure 'upward accountability' (Hulme & Edwards, 2013:8). On an individual level, the marks of development practice are known as *professionalism*, an umbrella term for different sets of behaviours that mark the public setting as opposed to the private (Roy, 2011:588). That is, from the funding side, NGOs inherit Weber-esque (see 3.1) hierarchies and bureaucratic procedures for efficiency and accountability (Harwood & Creighton, 2009:4; Sharma, 2006:79).

NGOs' other 'parent' are social movements. Viewing social movements as the perfect family 'in which everyone got along just fine' (Hodžić, 2014:243), results from nostalgia rather than actual peace and acceptance, especially when bearing the overlooked internal class oppressions in mind (*ibid.*; Roy, 2009). Yet two aspects distinguish them from development practice: the openness towards emotions (Ahmed, 2013; Goodwin *et al.*, 2001), and that they 'can also be regarded as the

²⁰ Since not all NGOs operating in India are formally registered, it is impossible to give an exact number (Sharma, 2006:85).

²¹ See Sharma (2006:68) for an examination of the heteronormative images surrounding masculinised, efficient states and funders, and feminised, caring NGOs.

expression of specific values' (della Porta & Diani, 2006:66). Social movements are guided by values and a desire to transform society. These values are the birthplace of NGOs. The more clearly articulated or radical these values are, the more blatant the difference to the bureaucratic development practice structures they are merged with. This is specifically evident in the case of the IWM, with its principles of socialism, non-hierarchical organising, and the redistribution of resources and power (Omvedt, 1990; Sharma, 1989:26).

'NGOs present a fluid, contradictory web of relations' (Townsend *et al.*, 2004:882). They are situated in-between corporate rules and feminist principles. They intend to appear professional, yet caring. This means that, when asking feminist NGO members how they understand leadership, one needs to remain conscious of mainstream and feminist perspectives, keeping their *hybridity* in mind.

4.3. Communicative processes

I now turn to the role of communication, which plays an important factor in the organisational setting of my study. Following the Barefoot Collective (2009:16f.), I perceive organisations as *living systems*, continuously changing and evolving. Each member can be seen as a cell of the organism. They are interdependent and can experience ripple effects of change, which are difficult to ascribe to one single cell of an entire system. According to Langley & Tsoukas (2010:4), organisations are 'constituted by the interaction processes among its members'. That is, the members' conversations co-create the shared lived realities of an organisation: 'communication generates, not merely expresses, key organizational realities' (Ashcraft *et al.*, 2009:2). Hence, for my purpose, the way the members talk about leadership is not inconsequential but deemed to fundamentally form the collective leadership experiences inside the NGO circle.

4.4 Framing analysis, or: What's the Problem Represented to be?

Having laid out how the organisational context is regarded in this study, I now turn to the last element of the theoretical framework: how I intend to analyse the conceptualisation of leadership among the members. I will concentrate on the *frames* that can be detected in our discussions.

Framing analysis builds to a large extent on Goffman (1974) who credits Bateson (1952) with being the first social scientist to theorise 'framing'. According to Bateson (2000:186), a frame 'is (or delimits) a class or set of messages (or meaningful actions).' Similar to the frame of a painting, people separate a figure from the ground (Clair, 1993:117). The frame, as a mental snapshot, determines *how* the image is perceived. Ferree & Merrill (2000) explain the four concepts of

discourse, ideology, frames, and framing as emerging from each other. *Discourses* are the overarching category. They are broad communication systems that link and relate concepts through an underlying logic. In a 'power discourse', for example, one would look specifically at *interpersonal dynamics* with a focus on power (im-)balances. Since different speakers and concepts are lumped together, discourses are full of conflicting messages and interpretations. *Ideologies* are on the level below discourses. They are more coherent, as they combine concepts according to specific sets of norms. They are about ideas and values, thinking and doing. The lowest level in this pyramid, the one I use as my basic viewpoint in this study, are *frames*. Ferree & Merrill (2000:456) define frames as 'cognitive ordering that relates events to one another: it is a way of talking and thinking about things that links idea elements into packages.' Just as the frame of a painting, mental frames only show *how* to look at things. They do not show *why* this would matter, as this would be part of the broader category of *ideology*. Discourses are *what* is discussed, ideologies *why*, and frames *how*. The whole process of how discourses, ideology, and frames are linked is called *framing* and can be both *strategic* – intentionally constructed, very common by collective actors like a movement – and *social* – building on communicative processes as discussed above (*ibid.*).

Concentrating on the frames as the basis of broad phenomena allows dissecting important underlying factors that influence the decisions made on the basis of the chosen frames. The feminist scholar Carol Bacchi developed a specific method for analysing frames called 'What's the Problem Represented to be' (WPR), offering a structured analysis according to six guiding questions (see *Figure 1*).

<i>Bacchi's (2012) WPR approach</i>
Q1. What's the 'problem' (for example, of 'problem gamblers', 'drug use/abuse', 'gender inequality', 'domestic violence', 'global warming', 'sexual harassment', etc.) represented to be in a specific policy or policy proposal?
Q2. What presuppositions or assumptions underpin this representation of the 'problem'?
Q3. How has this representation of the 'problem' come about?
Q4. What is left unproblematic in this problem representation? Where are the silences? Can the 'problem' be thought about differently?
Q5. What effects are produced by this representation of the 'problem'?
Q6. How/where has this representation of the 'problem' been produced, disseminated and defended? How has

Figure 1: WPR's six guiding questions. Source: Bacchi (2012:21), edited by author.

WPR is normally used in the political science context to analyse policy strategies. However, I find it useful to narrow the focus of a fuzzy concept such as *leadership*. I concentrate on the frames that are chosen to conceptualise leadership, since the way how we present an issue – be it because of deliberate, strategic decisions or subconsciously, due to social relations – shows a wide range of underlying ideas. These ideas again influence how we react to or interact with this issue. In the same way in which ‘words make worlds’ (Cornwall, 2010:1), the mental snapshots we take of the world may be seen as defining our actions.

4.5 Putting together a framework to analyse leadership frames in feminist NGOs

The heart of this analytical framework are the frames the members choose to discuss leadership. To be succinct, I concentrate on four of the six questions stated by Bacchi (2012). For every leadership frame I discuss in the analysis, I carve out ‘*what [leadership] is represented to be*’ (Q1); lay open the *underlying assumptions* (Q2); and point out what *remains silenced* in this representation (Q4). In order to highlight the inherent contradictions, I then discuss the *effects* (Q5) of the frames when blended together.

To acknowledge the organisational setting, I combine the four presented theories above: I analyse leadership as a *buzzword*, using Bacchi's WPR approach, while being aware of the *hybridity* of the organisations where these discussions are situated, as these *communicative processes* build the shared lived reality of leadership experiences. *Figure 2* illustrates the dominant focus of this analysis, the frames, and how I am informed in this by the other three theoretical concepts, in order to engage with the core question: what is leadership?

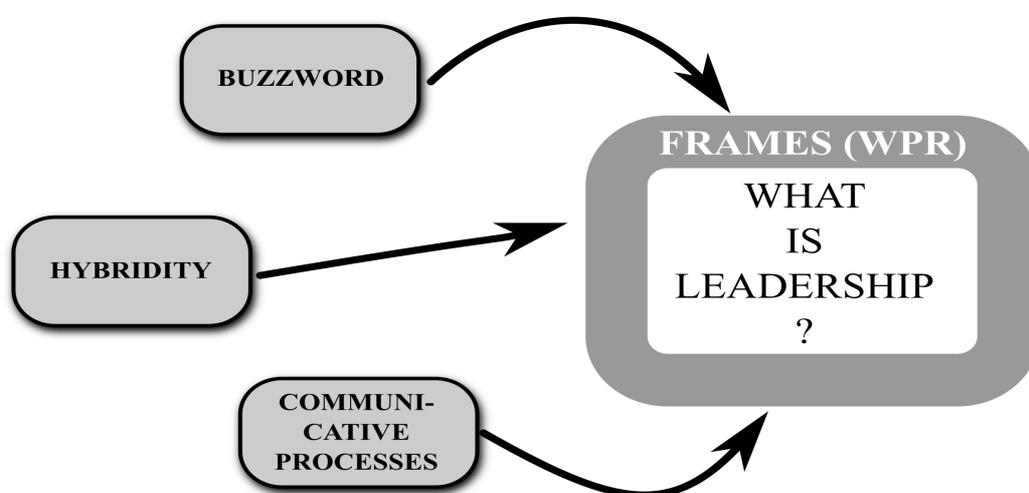


Figure 2: Framework to analyse leadership frames in feminist organisations. Source: the author.

In this framework, it is important to acknowledge my role as an outsider who also combines a certain tension, as I am viewed mutually as Western and feminist – which in the light of intersectionality does not mean an either/or list but is lumped together. I will deal with this aspect of research in the next section, when introducing the methodology.

5 Methodological choices and reflections

Reflecting on methodology – on how we do what we do – opens up possibilities and exposes choices.

Joey Sprague (2005:19)

With the theoretical framework settled, the question arises how this study intends to deal with the RQs stated above. Bearing in mind the plurality and fluidity in the social construction of meaning, 'it is not possible to talk about *one* feminist epistemology' (Lykke, 2010:176). I thus present my personal roadmap here, indicating the stumbling blocks I faced along the research journey.

5.1 A feminist way of producing knowledge

Feminist research is less characterised by its research methods or techniques *per se* but its *methodology*, the 'underlying set of beliefs about how and for what purposes research should be conducted' (Beckman, 2014:165). Beckman (2014) identifies eight principles for feminist research.²² They capture the fundamental ideas of feminist methodology, following the 'basic tenets' (*ibid.*:165) that feminist research is guided by feminist values, specifically *egalitarianism* and *equality* for people regardless of their gender (and I may add, other social identities). I expand here on the two principles that proved to be most challenging in this research: *mixed methods* and *reflexivity*.

Beckman (2014:168) explicitly requests multidisciplinary, mixed-method research, a sentiment which is shared by many social scientists, be they feminists or not (see e.g. Bryman, 2012:628ff.; Creswell, 2009:153ff.). I first planned to conduct a multi-layered case study, based on a variety of data, including published reports, internal documentation, participant observation, and informal and formal interviews. I found that the differences between published descriptions and conversation

²² 1. Acknowledge power imbalances; 2. Use feminist language in your questions to find relevant answers; 3. Listen to women's experience, to 'center the margins' (hooks, 2000); 4. Emphasise and recognise diversity and intersectionality; 5. Do multidisciplinary and mixed-method research; 6. Be reflexive; 7. Consider the social relationships in the research process; 8. Reflect upon the use of your research (Beckman, 2014:166-170).

about leadership are worthy to be investigated and discussed further. However, I soon discovered that the fascinating main aspect is the act of *talking* about leadership. This I concentrate on here.

Reflexivity is the premise that researchers have to recognise their self in the process, uncover biases, hidden privilege, and power dynamics between researcher and researched, in order to establish more egalitarian research relationships (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2010:4).²³ It is one of the most popular aspects of feminist methodology and has spilled over to mainstream research. Yet some suspect that it is now a mere lip service with no deeper meaning (Patai, 1994; Pillow, 2003). Criticising anti-racism workshops, hooks (2000:56) states, 'acknowledgment of racism is significant *when* it leads to transformation' (emphasis mine). Yet how do I make sure that my reflexivity does not paralyse (Kapoor, 2004; Sultana, 2007:375) but actually enable change?

I anticipated several of my social identities to influence this research process, such as the fact that I am a white, European postgraduate student in her mid-twenties. They turned out to matter less in terms of privilege but more in marking me as an *outsider* (see Rose, 1997:312). Some members suspected me to attempt to evaluate their organisation; even when I emphasised that I was not there to assess or judge, the interviews were constant negotiations of our roles in a *professional* context, from decidedly positive presentations of an organisation, to fearful undertones when it came to discussing grievances, to the idea that in an interview one has to speak 'professionally' and not swear. Furthermore, as I was and still am personally biased towards non-hierarchical structures, I want to reiterate that hierarchies are not *per se* seen as negative in feminism.

5.2 Research design

As the *strategy of inquiry* – the type of study, providing direction for the research procedures (Creswell, 2009:9) – I chose an embedded single-case-study design (Yin, 2014:55). Interpreting the New Delhi feminist NGO circle as a single *case* and the different feminist organisations as *units* embedded in it, reflects back to their shared sense of belonging and allows me to consider the communicative processes among the members in the case and the autonomous units. As Flyvbjerg (2006:222) argues, case studies are at the core of human learning. The scientific paradigm favours context-independent knowledge (general theories and models) over context-dependent knowledge.

²³ Indeed, this process of gaining self-awareness is also a key aspect of *agency*, as mentioned in Chapter 3.3. This shows again how many principles of feminist researchers are also principles of feminist leadership – or rather, feminist principles, full stop.

Research, however, suggests that people tend to be more engaged and learn best from stories, i.e. specific cases rather than theories (Berliner, 1992; Foran, 2001; Lundeberg *et al.*, 1999).

According to Flyvbjerg (2006:230), a common way of choosing a case is to look for *critical* cases, where something is least or most likely to happen. This is why I chose feminist organisations to examine leadership frames, as they were 'most likely' to have a critical opinion on leadership.²⁴ I further picked New Delhi as a site, as I expected it to be *paradigmatic*, i.e. likely to highlight general characteristics of feminist NGOs in the South: they are settled in hierarchies, both emerging from the Indian socio-cultural context and their donor dependencies, and hold tight ties between the organisations in their small circle of about ten NGOs. Finally, out of the five organisations in the circle I interacted with, I looked at two organisations more closely, as they offer an important contrast when it comes to their experience with (feminist) leadership, one doing FL development projects and one decidedly not.

5.3 Methods: with whom and how to explore leadership

5.3.1 Sampling (with whom)

I also used a mixture of convenience and purposeful sampling to pick the actual participants²⁵ for this research. My entry point was my interning with one of the organisations, which gave me the chance to explore and understand better the connections in their NGO circle. While ideally I would have talked to every member, time and access, both in light of the above-mentioned outsider role, forced me to change my research focus. I interviewed the participants in their free time or during working hours. It was a gracious offer on their part either way; I did not want to overstay my welcome. I thus concentrated on the *programme* staff – as opposed to administrative staff – to capture the perceptions of those who are not in authority positions but are directly involved in forming official positions. I interviewed the entire programme staff of the two organisations in focus, and talked to members from three other organisations from the NGO circle, amounting to 23 interviewees.²⁶ The members are quite a homogeneous group in several aspects: most of them are young, in their 20s, have an upper/middle class background and are fluent in English, except for the

²⁴ And 'least likely' to be absolutely bored by this topic.

²⁵ In this thesis, I use the words *participants*, *interviewees*, and *members* interchangeably.

²⁶ See Appendix I for a list of the interviews, including length, date, and whether they were recorded or not.

interns from one of the organisations.²⁷ Out of all the participants, only two were men, which reflects the general gender-ratio in these organisations.

5.3.2 Data collection and analysis (how)

While in the spirit of data triangulation and mixed-method approaches, I collected a spectrum of different data – *texts* such as FL manuals, reports on their organisational history, participant and overt *observation*, *informal* and *formal* group and individual *interviews* – the heart of the analysis are the latter, the semi-structured formal interviews with the above mentioned members.²⁸

In the interviews, we talked about their experience of leading and following in their organisations and in general. Thus the interviews surrounded the question what leadership and feminist leadership actually means to them.²⁹ The analysis therefore builds consciously upon an interview *artefact*, constructed between all research participants, based on our social interaction in the organisational setting.³⁰

These qualitative interviews took in most cases about an hour and were audio-recorded, unless the participant did not want to, and took place inside the NGO offices, or, in the case of former members, in a café. While I initially envisioned group interviews to be most insightful and appropriate to discuss leadership in organisations, most interviews were done one-on-one, with the exception of three, as this proved to be easiest for the participants to organise, and flexibility and respect for their schedule was important to me. Besides, after a couple of one-on-one sessions, I realised that this kind of intimacy was more comfortable and thus more appropriate for several participants, to also explore the difficult aspects of leadership and power that arose. I decided against focus group interviews – bringing together participants from different organisations – both due to time constraints but also precisely for the reason that personal grievances came up that would not have been voiced in a heterogeneous group.

²⁷ The interviews were held in English, which is also the operational language, alongside Hindi, in the organisations. It is the second language for all participants, as for most of them Hindi is their mother tongue and for me, German. One group interview was held in Hindi with the help of an interpreter, since my Hindi was not sufficient to conduct a full interview, yet the participants felt more comfortable in Hindi.

²⁸ For a complete list of the data collected, see Appendix II.

²⁹ The interview guide can be made available upon request.

³⁰ See e.g. Holstein & Gubrium (2011) and Silverman (2013) on the importance to recognise the influence of the interview talk on the data taken out of it.

Following the transcription, I analysed the data with the software *TAMS*.³¹ I coded and built categories as they emerged from the texts (Creswell, 2009:143), subsequently condensing them into 'frames' using the WPR approach I described above (4.4).

5.4 Ethical considerations

With this research, I face several ethical dilemmas. The topic proved to be sensitive for a couple of participants, as it relates to feelings of powerlessness. I thus tried to make sure that everyone is aware that they can freely decide to participate or not, regardless of their colleagues' decision. Using pseudonyms for the participants and by refraining from recognisable descriptions of the organisations (such as when they were founded, under which circumstances, what they work on, etc.), I tried to ensure their confidentiality and anonymity (Kaiser, 2012). To further minimise the risk of trouble, I sent them a draft of this thesis to give them a chance to comment on it, check for misinterpretations, and request points to be left out or rewritten. These ethical considerations are also the reason why I will not focus on contrasting the cases in the following analysis or discuss in depth how certain organisational characteristics may influence the framing. Instead, I shall rather concentrate on the dominant frames coming up in the whole case, which is also in line with the overall RQ, focusing on the framing of an upcoming buzzword by feminist NGO *members*.

5.5 Limitations

This study has several limitations that need to be kept in mind. Built on a feminist research framework, I tried to do 'research with' feminist NGO members in New Delhi rather than 'about' (Sultana, 2007:375). Yet their input, albeit palpable, is more implicit than I had wished for. As the participants have many other responsibilities and thus simply not the time to engage in lengthy discussions, I decided to formalise and structure the interviews more than previously imagined. The thesis is therefore to the largest degree built on my interpretations.

Language is vital in this study, as I analyse the way a *buzzword* is framed. That English is neither the participants' nor my native language is hence of great importance, and should be understood as a cautionary mark for the validity of the findings (Temple & Young, 2004). In a similar vein, I mostly agree with Desai & Potter's (2006) dismissive attitude towards the (carefree) use of interpreters. I nevertheless used an interpreter for one interview, which makes it more difficult to compare this interview with the others. Due to space constraints, I do not elaborate on the

³¹ TAMS: <http://tamsys.sourceforge.net/>.

implications of using group and individual interviews (see Liljestrom, 2010) and different locations (see Herzog, 2012).

Finally, most members of the New Delhi feminist NGO circle have a middle/upper-class background; the urban, academic setting surely influences their perspectives on leadership, which should be kept in mind when considering the further implications of this research.

6 Empirical analysis: entangling leadership frames

To be free in an age like ours, one must be in a position of authority.
That in itself would be enough to make me ambitious.

Ernest Renan (1841, cited in Dingle, 2000:139)

Having explained the research design of this study, I now turn to the results and the discussion of the findings. In a first step, I give a short overview of the case and participants, before discussing six different leadership frames that I found to be used most prominently in the interviews, concentrating on their representation of leadership, underlying assumptions, and what is silenced in each frame. I then discuss the effects and implications for leadership experiences in the organisations the combination of these frames appear to have.

6.1 Overall characteristics of New Delhi's feminist NGOs

Only a handful of the NGOs in New Delhi call themselves, officially, feminist.³² Traditional/fundamental politics or an outspoken disdain for the Western term³³ are two potential reasons for the considerable small group of feminist NGOs in New Delhi, according to the participants. Besides, being outspoken feminist causes difficulties to raise funds: 'when we

³² As written before, it is impossible to give an accurate estimate of the number of NGOs active in New Delhi, let alone those working specifically on women's rights. In 2002, a massive study was conducted and mapped the back then estimated 1.2 million NGOs in India, according to the categories religion, social service, education, sports, health, yet failed to include a 'women' or 'human rights' category (PRIA, 2003; see also Srivastava & Tandon, 2005). The information I gathered stems from the interviews and additional talks and readings as part of my internship in one of the feminist NGOs, and is to be understood as merely anecdotal evidence.

³³ Or rather its use in what Kishwar (1990:26) calls the 'feminist establishment' in India's cities, constituting of an intellectual elite closely working with international organisations yet estranged from the majority of women in India. See also 2.2 on the complicated notion of feminism in India. These concerns, a new spur of fundamentalist adversary alongside the depiction of feminism being a Western export product, are also reflected upon in the global feminist movements context (see e.g. CREA *et al.*, 2007:13ff.).

approach funders, we refrain from using that word' (Dipti).³⁴ Although the feminist identity is given by the organisation, it is shared by the absolute majority of the members, bearing in mind, as Sunita says, 'my feminism is not your feminism.'

Apart from this basic consensus on politics, feminist NGOs in New Delhi differ considerably: be it in *size*, from small teams of a handful members to over twenty employees, let alone consultants; their *history* – a few emerged from collectives, most were set up by several activists together, and some are the brain-child of single founders; their *regional focus*, with some directly working with communities in Delhi and others spreading to the whole South Asian region; their *thematic areas*, from sexuality to labour rights or technology; or their *overall rights-based approach* to their work. As for the latter, more progressive, pleasure-based ones are more common than those with a violence prevention-perspective, yet differing in the exact understanding of it (CREA, 2006:3f.).³⁵

The two organisations I draw from in particular also differ in their *organisational structure*. Org1 has a conventional, hierarchical structure with a clear divide between programme and administrative staff, headed by an executive director. Org2 instead has a 'core team' which combines programme and administrative staff, that responds together to the organisation's founder. The organisations are also supported by interns, long-term volunteers, kitchen and cleaning staff, and Org1 in particular by a number of consultants. Their influence is difficult to grasp and only marginally acknowledged, as they do not show up in official organigrams or reports. Org1 does not engage in leadership project whereas Org2 explicitly does.³⁶

The overall feminist NGO circle can be seen as tight-knit, with a multitude of ties between the organisations as well as the members themselves, with the usual consequences of network-like structures: a rich web of relationships, built on friendships, gossip, and collaborative synergies (Arnold, 2011; Simpson, 2015). This implies that the framing of leadership does not happen in an organisational bubble. The communicative processes overcome the office boundaries and subtly

³⁴ This is also a point raised by previous research; see for instance Smyth (1999) on the hesitance in using the 'f-word' in development practice in times of gender mainstreaming.

³⁵ See Jolly (2007) for a discussion on pleasure-based development practice and Eyben (2003) or Cornwall & Nyamu-Musembi (2004) for an overview and a dissection of the complicated use of the rights-based approach in development practice. One might even argue that *rights* is just as much a buzzword as *leadership*, *participation*, and *empowerment*, since, as a member of the IWM interviewed by CREA (2006:4) remarks: 'it seems to be the one word that everyone understands in any language. It's the one thing you don't have to translate!'

³⁶ As explained in Chapter 5.4, I do not concentrate on these differences, in order to ensure participants' anonymity. While an in-depth within-case analysis is beyond the scope of this thesis, I cautiously say that these differences do *not* appear to influence the way leadership is framed.

influence how leadership is constructed in the entire circle, as Malhar's reflection about a meeting with another feminist organisation shows: '*they* do actual non-hierarchical work and not just *say* they do.'

6.2 Reflecting about leadership: some overarching remarks

Two overall factors emerged I want to draw attention to: the static notion of leaders and followers and the important role of emotions.³⁷ While most questions were about the concept, answers and stories dealing with persons were far more common; when we hear leadership, our mind goes first to leader:

Author: What is leadership to you?

Malati: *Someone* who lets others exercise agency and choice. (Emphasis mine)

This is accompanied by an invisibility of those who are led. When I brought up the word 'follower', it evoked unease – ranging from resistance (Bahiya: 'it conjures the image of *blindly* following'), reframing from personalised understanding to thought (Malati: 'there is a movement or ideology you may follow – I'm not sure if I *have* to follow a leader'), to laughingly dismissing (Dipti: 'I'd never use that word. I just say 'I admire a lot''). It was hesitantly added:

Malhar: I've never thought of following. /.../ I have just never thought about followers being bad or followership being bad, because we always think of *leadership* being bad.

Sunita: Perhaps in responding to [our boss] and in the exchange that we have with her, maybe we are following her, I don't *know* /.../ I've never looked at it that way because what has been in focus is leadership /.../ *young feminist* leadership. /---/ I guess we follow each other; it's not just [our boss] whom we follow *if* I were to use that word /.../ in a connotation that I'm comfortable with. /---/ The idea is everybody emerges as a confident independent feminist leader, and if you wanna be that, you need to take inputs from everybody else.

While Sunita's comment is somewhat reconciling, as it seems that rather the word causes discomfort than the practice associated with it, it is interesting that there is apparently no term to describe the process of reacting to leadership or those subjected to positional authority. The resistance to frame any personal experience as being guided by another person combined with the full embrace of guiding yourself is at the core of several leadership frames we will look at and has severe implications for the experience of leadership. By not acknowledging all the times where people follow orders or take to learn from each other, we ignore a majority of situations in people's

³⁷ A word on gender. As feminist theory has started off with dismantling the inherent power dynamics between men and women (Porter, 1999:3f.), it might be surprising that I do not discuss gender as a dominant frame. This has to do with the fact that in the feminist NGOs I concentrate on most members are female or in some way deviating from the cis-straight-male norm, so that other categories of identity were more important. Indeed, the fact that feminism is intersectional was vital for many participants.

everyday lives, and miss out on powerful feminist discussions what a constructive, hierarchy-conscious way of following might be.

What the interviews showed most of all: *leadership* is much more than a word. It is rather a trigger for memories linked with group experiences and questions of power. Virtually every interview had either emotional heights or lows, in most cases both. They brought up autobiographic stories of inspirational colleagues, professors, or glorious moments of standing up against the parents – and horrific memories of humiliating gossip and powerlessness in the workplace. It is the anchor for a wide range of associations, from everyday parenting to world leaders; it is ‘embodied emotion’, from giddy excitement to paralysing shame (see Davidson & Milligan, 2004). Leadership is difficult to understand precisely because it stands for different experiences, many of them recollected with extreme feelings. This makes it so important to at least attempt to grasp the underlying concepts. This task we turn to now.

6.3 Leadership framed: from everyday leaders, positions, and personalities

Although what is striking about discussing leadership is the myriad of nuances and understandings of it, there were a couple of ways how leadership was framed that stuck out, that were used repeatedly and across the case; in what follows I concentrate on six frames. Bearing in mind the dominance of leader-centred discussions, the first four frames I present are leader-based, whereas the last two ones deal with *leadership*. The following table gives an overview of the six frames.

Focus	Frame name	WPR
Leader	Agency	Everyone is a leader of their own life.
	Independence	A leader is someone who can implement her ideas.
	Guarantor	A leader is the one who is responsible for the team.
	Inspired follower	A leader is someone I admire.
Leadership	Critique	Leadership must hold space for criticism.
	Foreign concept	Leadership comes from Western management studies.

Figure 3: Overview leadership frames. Source: the author.

6.3.1 'Everyone is a leader': the *Agency* frame

Sonal: [They] are the leaders in their own lives; the question is: are they making decisions by themselves or are there still decisions being made *for* them? /.../ These *chota chota*³⁸ things happening in the lives of people is leadership.

Radha: Leadership is about *yourself* making informed choices independently, critically aware of what influences your decision. /.../ If anything else changes, if you influence another person, that's fine but no other person is needed.

Malati: We are all leaders in our own ways /.../ So if you have a leader, that doesn't mean you have followers.

WPR: everyone is a leader

The by far most popular frame, coming up in almost all interviews, is the depiction of everyone as a leader of their own lives, defying the notion of hierarchies or even necessity of other people for that matter: leading means making decisions for oneself, by oneself. Leadership is thus basically a different word for the feminist concepts of *agency* and *choice*, that is the right and capability of making informed decisions for oneself in one's everyday life (Akram, 2012).³⁹ As seen above (3.2), this understanding of leadership is also at the core of most depictions of FL, demonstrating an affinity to feminist thought.⁴⁰

Assumptions: independence as salvation

Firmly situated in the human rights discourse, the frame is based on the idea that everyone should have the right and capability to determine their own lives, independently. This is also demonstrated by the members' interest in advancing individuals' leadership capabilities:

Malati: Once they transition from being a student to an intern, and now they're doing a fellowship. I think these are steps and marks in leadership /.../ There are only leaders and leaders in the making.

Silences: group context

Due to the focus on the individual, the frame ignores the social context, in two ways. Firstly, as Lãm (1994:874) discusses in regard to the pro-life/pro-choice debate, framing human reproduction as a debate about a single person's womb, this individualisation separates a person's decision from the social context. When considering the latter, alternative solutions are imaginable, e.g. a community that is willing to take care of a baby, non-judgementally. As valid as the desire for

³⁸ *Chota* – Hindi for small.

³⁹ *Agency* and *choice* are also the ideas that were spoken of the most in the interviews when discussing feminism explicitly, alongside *intersectionality*. That means that there is some crucial overlapping between 'being a feminist' and 'being a leader' – for feminists.

⁴⁰ *Agency* is apparently a typical framing of leadership for development projects, as Priya even jokes about it, asking why they in Org1 do not just call their trainings leadership trainings, as their empowerment courses would of course also 'create leaders'.

independency in decision-making is, the focus on autonomy means a neglect of communities, almost insinuating that individual choices do not affect others or happen in a vacuum. This is ironic, bearing in mind that feminism envisions a social transformation. Secondly, with the focus on individuals, group contexts and inherent hierarchies get no attention; in Chapter 3, we saw that leadership is usually a group concept, as it 'interjects human agency into collective action' (DeCesare, 2013:239). Conversely, the *Agency* frame offers no perspective on the relationships between different leaders (or leaders in the making).

6.3.2 'A leader is someone who can implement her ideas': the *Independence* frame

On a related note but with striking differences, participants mentioned autonomy as key for leadership. Adalyn describes what a leader is to her, based on her experiences in a conference with other activists:

They were people who had their own organisations, their own programmes, their own campaigns, maybe small, maybe big, but they were all leaders in *some* thing. /.../ There you could see a bunch of thirty women sitting together, actually coming up with radical ideas, /.../ very well [aware] that they could actually *afford* to take these ideas back to their homes and implement it.

WPR: leadership means getting things done

What matters here is the notion of ownership and the ability to implement. For Adalyn, being a leader is about independency, that she herself can make the final call, make decisions, and actually be – and feel – responsible for her project. In some way, this understanding is an extreme form of the *Agency* frame, as it builds upon the same idea, of being able to act for oneself. Yet while the former focuses on an egalitarian and simultaneously individualist notion of 'seeing everyone as leaders of their own lives', the *Independence* frame paradoxically asks for other people to be involved, as it is about impact:

Priya: I don't think of everyone as a leader. Maybe I'm talking in a quantitative way but there has to be a certain degree of impact if not in number of people. /.../ You may make those decisions, I make those decisions, yet are we both called leaders? We *should* be is different. What actually *happens* is what I'm wondering.

Priya refers to a socially shared notion of leadership, dismantling the *Agency* frame as an aspirational rather than socially accepted perspective of leadership. As much as we should be all referred to as leaders, in reality we are not, showing the tension between perspectives in feminist organisations, set between egalitarian goals and social realities.

Assumptions: doing trumps talking

Perceiving leaders as being independent has a couple of interesting underlying assumptions. Firstly, to lead, you must engage in a project, organisation, or movement so much, that you can feel that you 'own' it, rather than just being a part of it. Secondly, it insinuates that while there might be discussions in a group, only those in a leading position are able to get their ideas across, can do as they please, which implies a hierarchical understanding of leadership and decision-making. Finally, the notion that leading means being able to implement shows that only what really gets done matters. This is particularly interesting, as for the participants a core aspect of feminism is discussing. Moreover, feminists often aim to avoid an outcome-oriented perspective, perceived as stemming from the corporate world, in favour of process-orientation (see Menon, 2007).

Silences: followers' influence

What is neglected is the role and impact of followers. As this frame does acknowledge the need of other people for leadership, the emphasis on the leader as opposed to the rest of the group, is more blatant than in the *Agency* frame. Especially since discussions are downplayed compared to outcome, this results in a twist of feminists' emphasis on critique and its important role in organising.

6.3.3 'Being a leader means 'making sure': the *Guarantor* frame

Malhar: [The leader is] the one who gives orders, the one who makes sure things are done, the one who reports to the funders /.../ The one who is leading makes sure that people are happy, are satisfied with their job, their grievances are heard, and their issues are dealt with.

Malati: You are in a position because I'm a Programme Associate and you are an intern /.../ That's my power but my power is also to let them come where I am /---/ I'm trying to bring them where I am right now.

Dipti: We can't be doing what they want all the time because they don't understand what we envision for them.

WPR: the leader is responsible

While the previous frames painted a somewhat egocentric picture, the *Guarantor* frame is decidedly altruistic. Just as the *servant leadership style* in Chapter 3.1, the leader is seen at service to the movement, organisation, or her followers. She needs to make space for criticism, she is responsible for the followers' wellbeing, and sometimes has to act, like a knowing parent, against the wishes of her followers, if she has better things planned for them. It also reminds of the *nurturant-task style*, as hierarchies ('gives orders'), consideration ('makes sure'), and affection ('we envision for them') are brought together.

Assumptions: those in charge have more power

Thinking this frame further, it assumes that the leader is not only there to make everyone happy but actually that she has the power to do so, that is, that she is able to influence a movement, her employees or followers, more than any other person could, indicating a hierarchical understanding of leadership. Yet what is important here and brings us back to the FL concept (3.3), is that power and hierarchies in itself are not treated as a problem; indeed, it is seen as natural or productive, building also on ideas of experience: Malati as a Programme Associate knows better and can help the others to get there; Dipti envisions things for them which they cannot fully see just yet.

Silences: justifying hierarchies

Apart from the immense pressure it creates for the leader, the *Guarantor* frame further weakens the engagement of every other person involved in the movement or organisation, as they fundamentally depend on the leader's grace. It neglects the role of others. On an organisational level, this creates a certain elite and cements hierarchies yet also makes sure that many important conflicts cannot get resolved, as grievances do not get discussed.

6.3.4 'As she always said...': the *Inspired Follower* frame

Lina: She was amazing, she was this *amazing* person. She taught me a *lot*. She is this famous person here!

Dipti: It takes a really long time to get me following someone. It will only happen if someone is exceptional.

Neha: There was a time where I used to look towards the people who teach here and try to be like them. Now other girls look towards *me* what I do. I want that looking at me inspires them to do something. That is leadership for me.

Malhar: I always look to her to understand what leadership is.

WPR: charismatic leadership

What the members describe relates to Weber's (1925:142ff.) charismatic leadership. The people they assign authority to have captivating personality traits ('amazing', 'famous', 'exceptional') and transmit ('taught me', 'look towards', 'inspire') some of their extraordinary wisdom, practice, or just their *being* to those ready to listen and follow. So who are these chosen leaders, or rather role models? As mentioned above (3.1), charismatic leadership is well-studied in social movement studies yet often only focusing on the 'great men' in front of mass movements, such as Martin Luther King, Jr. (Ford, 2003) or Mahatma Gandhi (Bligh & Robinson, 2010). Some participants do mention famous *female* feminists as leaders of Indian feminism:

Priya: When I think of feminist leaders, I'm thinking of Pramada⁴¹ I'm thinking of Nivedita⁴² I'm thinking of...

Malhar: I saw amazing leaders like Aruna Roy.⁴³

Yet in most cases they refer to people they know personally and who are not directly above them in the organisational structure. This resonates with the desire to bridge private and public boundaries, a core aspect of feminist thought (Lovenduski, 2015; Walton-Roberts, 2008). Not only is it important to the members to apply what they learn in different contexts, e.g. take parenting advice from their colleagues, but also to be open to seek and find inspiration in every person and area of their lives.

Assumptions: there are leaders and leaders

Dipti: If you're put in a position of leadership you become a leader. But how you become a leader when you're *not* a leader – *that's* the fascinating part.

Unlike Kotter (1990) who insists on differentiating between *managers* and *leaders*, Dipti uses the same word yet suggests that there exist different types of authority; positional and assigned or earned (see 3.3). Even more so, positional authority appears to be the 'boring' kind, the easily accepted and unquestioned one. What is the other kind then, the one that is 'fascinating'? When presenting leadership from the *Inspired Follower* frame, the conversations came to emotional heights: talking about inspiring individuals and what has been learned from them makes people happy; it is the 'bright orange' of leadership, or what Meindl *et al.* (1985) call the 'romance of leadership', a love story free from questions of hierarchies and power, as in this moment the emotional experience overcomes any mundane matters.

Silences: consequences of charisma

While the voluntary subscription to someone characterises the frame, it still emphasises the leader rather than the speaker. What exactly the following entails, if it is something else apart from learning, for instance, remains unclear, as the focus is on the specialness of the leader. What exactly makes this leader special is also not explained. The members seem intoxicated by the *gestalt* of their heroines rather than specific details, a factor also emphasised in research on *authentic* leadership (Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Shamir & Eilam, 2005). The frame also silences the

⁴¹ Pramada Menon is a queer feminist activist based in New Delhi and one of the founder members of CREA, a feminist organisation in New Delhi.

⁴² Nivedita Menon is a feminist writer and professor at Jawaharlal Nehru University in New Delhi.

⁴³ Aruna Roy is a political and social activist and the founders of the *Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathana* (the 'Workers and Peasants Strength Union').

consequences of charismatic leadership in an organisational setting, whether it undermines positional authorities, or whether hierarchies emerge due to the unequal share of charismatic influence among the members.

6.3.5 'Leadership must hold space for dissent': the *Critique* frame

Adalyn: You need to engage with followers. /.../ Followers get to critique, leaders have to take the criticism and implement it /.../ It's a *lot* of work. /.../ I'm not saying it's easy but if you are taking up the leadership, you should be willing to have space for followers to criticise it.

Malhar: For the ideal organisation I think it's very important for the staff members to have the /.../ space for questioning. /.../ There should be a 360 [degree] feedback where the staff can criticise the leadership and the leaders can criticise the staff. /.../ And I think an ideal organisation would be a place where people would be happy.

Sunita: If you're talking about feminism you're also talking about asking the question *why*.

Priya: In feminism [engaging followers] would be making people question – everyone else but you!

WPR: leadership must allow for criticism

Just as much as feminism is perceived to be about questioning and critique (Jagori, 2014:10), so is leadership in a feminist setting. In this frame it is stated that for leadership to function well, it must be possible to voice critique or at least respectfully ask the question *why*. There is an understanding that followers are those who get to criticise first and foremost. They focus, however, less on the implicit leader/follower divide, but emphasise collaboration and communion: one has to 'engage' with each other and there must be '360 degree feedback'.

Assumptions: critique requests connection

One important underlying thought is the hierarchical structure of the organisational space, as it is the followers who criticise, and the leaders who have to take it in and apply the critique. This is particularly important since the idea of challenging hierarchies and being overly critical of them is deemed to be typically feminist among several interviewees. This demonstrates that there is less of a need to fundamentally challenge status quo, and rather the need to be heard.

Bahiya: More like trying to walk in their shoes, and tell them things from their perspective, when I expect them to also walk in my shoes. So, it's a two-way thing and I think it's working out.

Gurdeep: Someone suggested let's start our weekly meeting with chai, let's all discuss our high points and low points in a team meeting.

What Bahiya and Gurdeep say here comes up in most conversations on feedback in the workplace: the plea for dissent is accompanied by notions of mutuality and community. It uncovers the fundamental desire for mutual understanding, contact, and connection, both in the form of everyday office friendship, such as taking lunch together and making jokes, but also being heard and

understood by one's colleagues, as well as in the bigger sense, of belonging to a collective or movement, and feeling to be part of it: Geetha was saddened when their project partners in rural areas referred to them as funders, although her organisation concentrate on knowledge building and view the money transaction as supplemental; Seema conceptualises feminist following in the context of the entire NGO circle, as respectful feedback to the initiating organisations; and Sonal's leadership stories are all situated in the movement. This reiterates not only Batliwala's (2011:66) insistence that relationships are essential for feminist leadership. It also shows that despite of the organisation's hybridity, the members feel they belong to the movement (Jagori, 2014:37; Roy 2011).

Silences: how to take criticism

What sets this frame apart from the ones before is the focus. While in the others the leader was always looked at, here the question how she might feel about all the criticism is only hinted at when Priya jokes that feminism encourages people to question everyone exempt yourself. Holding a space for criticism, without any support in place for those who get harsh feedback, is not only incredibly uncomfortable and demanding but actually difficult to implement, due to economic dependencies; the members mention anxiety regarding their job position. The fear that criticism can cost their job is very real to them, thus putting the *Critique* frame further in the realm of fantasy.

6.3.6 'I know leadership from management studies': the *Foreign Concept* frame

When asked for their immediate associations, the members usually said they expected the word either in a 'MBA' context or in the world of politics. In the other frames the word is brought close to their personal and organisational experience. Yet when leadership is presented in the *Foreign Concept* frame, a certain detachment dominated the conversation, sometimes humorous, sometimes cynical, but certainly not as passionate as before. This last frame I want to present here differs therefore fundamentally from the five before, as it is a meta-critique of the construction of leadership in the Indian feminist NGO context and not an aspirational tale like the others. The critique is in line with feminist scholars' fear of professionalisation, as e.g. Desai (2007:801) notes that feminist ideas have been 'transform[ed] into managerial solutions' that scratch the surface without challenging the underlying structural inequalities. I here describe how according to several members leadership is framed in their context, what assumptions they suspect, and what they think is overlooked, when following this frame.

Adalyn: They are looking for more ideas, they've realised that the movement is going through a phase where it might have reached a saturation point /.../ And they do understand in order to reach to the new audiences they have to change their language /.../ to the language of leadership /.../ They inculcate the

quality of a leader: 'I don't tell you what to *think*. You decide for yourself and you come up with the ideas and you give the ideas to *me*.'

Malhar: One of my first understandings of leadership was something good, because you can write it down on your CV. I joined the student council of my school because I could write it in my SAT applications, under leadership. So, the only thing I knew about leadership was that it was something good.

WPR: Management-speak for better production

Leadership is seen as a concept picked from a management discourse and planted into feminist organisations with varying intentions and consequences. An example is the use of first names instead of addressing a senior as 'mam' without explicating what this means for their work relationship. Some, like Adalyn, suspect a neoliberal purpose, that 'suddenly you are told that you are leaders' in order for you to *feel* empowered, so that you produce better ideas and feel generally good about yourself.

Assumptions: pick and choose

This means, that those who apply a management studies understanding of leadership seem to assume that it is possible to pick and choose, take a concept and apply it freely in a fundamentally different cultural context. They are also believed to assume that a superficial sense of agency is enough for people to work happily, that no profound change in organisational practice is necessary for employees to experience 'ownership' and responsibility.

Silences: socio-cultural context

This, however, would have unprecedented consequences, as 'the whole leadership idea' neglects implicit hierarchies such as class, caste, age – and thus clashes with the cultural 'baggage' the Indian staff members carry with them. The respect for elders, for instance, is deeply engrained, and thus critique is either not voiced by younger members in the first place, or they feel it confuses the whole relational dynamic between them. It may also result in the 'young leaders' being overwhelmed, as the change in their identity is too sudden, overburdening them. On the other hand, it also silences the existence of this cultural baggage on the other side, the 'older leaders' who are equally not prepared for the wave of criticism and lack of respect.

6.4 Bringing the frames together: implications for the experience of leadership

The cacophony of a buzzword arises when these frames appear together. I now turn to discuss three overarching effects that seem to influence the experience of leadership in the feminist organisations: concealed, static relationships; a FL fantasy land; and what impedes that.

6.4.1 Effects of contradicting messages: invisible, static relationships

While the frames overlap, they also contradict each other: The perspective the *Agency* frame offers, that everyone is a leader, clashes with notions of hierarchies implied in the *Independence* or *Guarantor* frame. The undoing of hierarchies in the *Inspired Follower* frame contradicts the need for any ownership for bringing change, and is also not easily reconciled with the somewhat rigid demand for space for criticism voiced in the *Critique* frame.

What these frames have in common to a great extent, however, is that talking about leadership means talking about leaders. Even in a feminist, power-conscious context, the notion of hierarchies is so engrained that the first look goes towards those on top.

The contradictions combined with the unconscious focus on leaders results in static, dualistic relationships. In an organisational setting with hierarchical positions that do not circulate, it seems to be difficult to perceive leadership as a process let alone a fluid one; instead, the personal actions are framed as leading or following based on whether they see themselves as leaders or followers in the organisational hierarchy, not based on their actions. This further inhibits conflict resolution and actual involvement of those with less positional authority. The leadership language promises an egalitarian relationship, as officially everyone's rights and influences are acknowledged. Yet power differences may get effectively silenced, as everyone is, of course, a leader.

That all these different experiences and nuances of meaning get summed up in this one word is hence problematic when we use it for development projects: we may officially aim for leadership in an agency sense but *also* convey the meaning of elites being more powerful and influential than others, let alone how the audience are going to interpret the term.

6.4.2 Feminist leadership is aspirational

Why, then, do the stories of paralysis and despair only come up when talking about the actual organisational experiences and not when describing, theoretically, what leadership means? Why does the word leadership not only not cause grievance but actually spark so many positive emotions and memories? For the members I spoke to, leadership in a feminist context is aspirational.

Sunita: When you attach [leadership] with the word feminist, now that changes many things because feminism *questions* hierarchies, feminism *questions* authority. So if it's feminist leadership, how *can* it be dictatorship? /.../ Leadership does not necessarily *mean* domination of minority; it's about being independent, it's about but being confident, /.../ it's about being informed about various options and choices and taking decisions accordingly.

What sets *leadership* from other buzzwords such as *empowerment* and *participation* apart is that it does not need *reclaiming* – a common feminist practice (Brontsema, 2004) – but rather *appropriation*: leadership is not a word that puts feminists such as Sunita at ease, due to the images of power ('dictatorship') it conveys. Yet through reconfiguration, by combining it with feminist, it becomes approachable and desirable (Cornwall, 2010:15).

So what exactly is FL, according to the members I spoke with? It appears to be the combination of the first five frames presented above in the most positive way. It is about self-confidence, the ability to make decisions and follow up on them, to not get stuck in talking, to be able to mutually engage, across positions.

Adalyn: For me feminist leadership suddenly made sense: taking the ideas of feminism and implementing it /.../ with access to resources. /.../ It's not just someone else implementing for you, cause you know it makes a lot of difference when you get to implement these theories. /.../ It's more a horizontal than a vertical structure.

The participants seem to get leadership's 'bright orange' buzz out of two types of experiences: the joy of being inspired by charismatic role models, and the satisfaction of *doing* leadership themselves in a feminist way, which means *collectively* in particular:

Malati: We always feel that solidarity here /.../ Now sometimes the competition seems a little tougher /.../ But we still talk a lot; solidarity is still there.

Many agree with Malati that these kinds of relationships are getting more difficult to cultivate. This is why we now focus on what hinders the establishment of FL in their organisations.

6.4.3 NGOisation impedes feminist leadership

A common criticism against young feminists, especially those working in NGOs, is that they see their job position as a stepping-stone in their career path (Menon, 2006:44). Called '9-5 feminists', they are suspected to be little interested in the cause. This is said to further exclude lower-class women in the IWM, since the NGO jobs are rather for postgraduates (*ibid.*:42; Roy, 2011). 'Real resistance has /.../ no salary', Roy (2004) polemically states, a sentiment also partially shared by some senior members I spoke with. Radha further wonders whether the younger generation has it 'too easy': as they get involved in organisations that already exist, they have not experienced the hardship of starting one. This criticism is also based on the fear of disconnect between the IWM and the members, as Fraser (2009:114) suspects to happen to 'gender experts'. The whole career critique is difficult in itself, bearing in mind that getting paid for work that fulfils someone can be viewed as an achievement in itself, a point made several times in the interviews. It also does not

hold fully true for the members I spoke with. Their commitment to the cause, their engagement in and belonging to the movement is fundamental for their feminist identity.

Yet this is usually put in the larger narrative of an accelerating process of *NGOisation*, the continuing institutionalisation of civil society and social movements into organisations that are funded by third parties such as businesses or (foreign) state agencies, and thus considered dependent and depoliticised (Jad, 2010). 'In the long run, NGOs are accountable to their funders, not to the people they work among' (Roy, 2004). Although the anxieties of the NGOisation critics are valid, they often get stuck in a blaming mindset, demonising the non-profits, which is again only part of the story, as NGOisation harms NGOs, too. Remembering NGOs' *hybridity*, the experiences with FL exemplify how the acceleration of NGOisation processes hardens the development practice structures and inhibits the realisation of the IWM values.

Feminist organisations in New Delhi feel the consequences of *projectification* – 'core funding' for the actual organisation, like overhead, organisational development, etc., diminishes in favour of funding for specific, most often short-term projects with clear-cut outcomes and only minor unspecified allowances. This development is especially disastrous in combination with the overall shrinking funding, in five ways. Firstly, collaborations are less likely when *secrecy* and *competition* thrive, as it undermines the sense of community in the IWM (Jagori, 2004:37ff.; Kerr, 2007:5). Secondly, the organisations react with an increasing *use of consultants* rather than permanent employees. This loosens the strong ties in the team, which is considered central for FL (Espino, 2007:59f.). Thirdly, projectification leads to *scattered themes and topics*. It is not clear who actually defines the organisation's purpose and everyday politics: for each funding proposal, the angle of a project has to be changed to appease the funders. Even if it is just a performance (Charma, 2010:99ff.), it nevertheless weakens the organisational autonomy (Chakravarti, 2008). This again makes it more difficult for the members to feel connected to it, further exacerbating their leadership experiences. Fourthly, it is a *matter of time*: with less resources allocated for organisational development, reflection and feedback – key aspects of FL – will not get enough attention (Menon, 2006). Finally, the organisations become increasingly *outcome-oriented*. This means that they are asked to focus more on pre-specified, presumably quantifiable goals, rather than the process of their work. Valuing outcome over process is arguably counter-productive, as social reality is too messy to be accurately captured by pre-defined goals (Oseen, 1999:105). It is also in contrast with feminist principles, and the insistence of members and feminist writers alike (e.g. Menon, 2006:46), to take fun seriously and make sure that work becomes pleasurable.

For FL to flourish, members need to be part of broader circle of collaboration and belonging and friendship-like relationships inside their respective organisation; they need to have time to reflect and discuss their organisation's principles, purpose, and politics. NGOisation processes thus make it harder for FL to become reality.

7 Conclusion: Bringing some feminism into our leadership discussions

Power is actualized only where word and deed have not parted company, where words are not empty and deeds not brutal, where words are not used to veil intentions but to disclose realities, and where deeds are not used to violate and destroy but to establish relations and create new realities.

Hannah Arendt (1959:178)

7.1 Summary of the thesis

Based on the premise that words carry meaning, and meaning influences action, I explored how leadership, is framed among members of feminist organisations in New Delhi. Starting with a context analysis, I showed how the contemporary IWM, the origin of New Delhi's feminist NGO circle, is critical of external funding, wary of 'career feminists', and builds the ideological core of the feminist organisations until today. In a short theoretical excursion on leadership studies, I argued that feminism offers a new perspective on leadership, especially in development practice, as it is built on egalitarian principles and has the transformative purpose to socially redistribute power. Presenting the theoretical framework, I demonstrated how leadership is a new development *buzzword* with interesting implications due to hierarchy and power associations. Guided by the understanding that *communicative processes* co-create members' leadership experiences and considering feminist NGOs' *hybridity*, I offered Bacchi's *WPR* approach to analyse the members' leadership frames. I then proceeded to present the research design, an embedded case study of the feminist NGO circle in New Delhi, using semi-structured interviews with 23 members, 17 of them from two contrasting units/organisations, as the main data set. Through a cross-case analysis I carved out the six most popular frames among the members: 1) *Agency* - seeing everyone as a leader of their own life; 2) *Independence* - stating that a leader is the one who is able to independently make their decisions; 3) *Guarantor* - representing a leader as the one who takes care of the process and particularly everyone involved; 4) *Inspired Follower* - describing leaders as the

ones that inspire and spark you; 5) *Critique* - emphasising the importance of critique in a mutual process of leadership; and 6) *Foreign Concept* - problematising the Westernised leadership approach in the Indian feminist context. I then showed how the contradicting stories of these leadership frames play out together to form a buzzword where followers are ignored, hierarchies hidden, and relationships more static and dualistic than the aspirational image of FL would allow. As the members continuously emphasise their feminist identity, also in regard to leadership, I end with a discussion on the practical impediments of a FL approach in organisations - the accelerating process of *NGOisation*. I found that support for short-term projects rather than organisational 'core' funding harms the organisations in multiple ways, and ultimately prohibits FL to flourish.

7.2 Research questions and implications

Coming back to the RQs stated at the beginning:

How is leadership framed among members of feminist NGOs in New Delhi?

Leadership is framed mostly positively, in multiple, often contradicting ways. It is influenced both by feminist discussions, as evidenced for instance by the popularity of the *Agency* frame, as well as the development practice structures, demonstrated by underlying notions of hierarchy for example in the *Independence* frame. Feminist NGOs' hybridity also becomes apparent in the meta-discussions on leadership, as a yearning for connection, mutual exchange, and belonging to the broader IWM alongside a critical examination of the challenges development practice poses. The chosen frames are often leader-centred, which makes the overall leadership representation somewhat static, dualistic, and one-sided. With the *Agency* frame being the most popular, positive and empowering (whereas the others carry implicit notions of hierarchy), it may allow a hidden elitist notion of leadership, unintentionally undermining the empowering self-leadership idea.

What does their framing imply for their experience of leadership processes in their organisations?

The members seem to get leadership's 'bright orange buzz' out of two types of experiences: the joy of learning from charismatic role models, and the satisfaction of doing leadership themselves in a way that acknowledges their feminist principles and purpose, that is, *feminist* leadership. Their choice of positive frames shows the aspirational character of this kind of leadership, and how much connection matters – both in everyday office experiences and in the broader sense of belonging to a feminist movement through collaboration and debate. This again means that rigid hierarchical structures, which limit the time for informal contact reflection and decrease the opportunities for each member's self-determination, result in grievances. Thus, the gap between their feminist fantasy and the experienced organisational reality hurts. This is intensified through the accelerating

process of *NGOisation*, which leaves less time for reflection, values growth over sustainability, and increases the fear of job loss in times of shrinking funding.

7.3 What this means for future research...

Regarding leadership in development practice, it would be useful to explore how other actors perceive and understand leadership, especially, for instance, funders, or grassroots organisations. Furthermore, a comparison of 'paper versus talk' seems promising to better understand the continuous enthusiasm around the concept of leadership.

As for FL, it is vital to critically examine the duality of an individualised agency concept alongside notions of hierarchical leadership. For this, it would be useful to carve out the followers' roles in the process, to sharpen self-awareness, and to allow for deeper engagement of everyone in the feminist movements.

7.4 ... and for future action

For the use of the buzzword *leadership*, we need to be aware of what we imply and that others might hear it differently. Whether this means rejecting the word altogether or appropriating it by using the ubiquitous calls for leadership projects as chances of feminist, aspirational subversion – what matters is being mindful of its implications. In terms of action for a more feminist approach to leadership, this study points to two areas of influence, the need to change the game *and* our way to play.

To improve our feminist leadership, we need to closer look at, dismantle, and change the immense effects of *NGOisation* on our work and wellbeing, not only in the broader movement but also in the organisations. For organisations to function optimally, more core funding must be made available. In the broader circles, it is vital to not let the fear of competition due to shrinking funds destroy the spirit of community, and to allow for more collaboration and less strategic secrecy.

As for the personal way to play the game, explicitly allowing dissent while at the same time cut oneself some slack would be a chance to shrink the gap between feminist fantasy and experienced reality. For a feminist approach to leadership, it is particularly important to strengthen self-awareness of one's own role in the leadership process, to shift the gaze from the (perceived) leader to oneself, to become aware of the personal power, and to increase the fun in the process.

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Appendix

Appendix I - List of interviews

No.	Pseudonym	Date	Length	Recorded Y/N	Quoted in thesis Y/N
1	Malati Bahiya Dipti Lina Gurdeep	January 2015	1h	N (informal)	N
2	Genna	January 2015	1h	N (informal)	N
3	Malhar	January 2015	2:38h	Y	Y
4	Parvati	January 2015	1:15h	N (requested not to)	N
5	Geetha	January 2015	1h	N (informal)	Y
6	Adalyn	January 2015	0:57h	Y	Y
7	Seema	January 2015	1h	N (informal)	Y
8	Lela	January 2015	0:30h	N (requested not to)	N
9	Sonal Priya Chanda	February 2015	1:39h	Y	Y Y N
10	Vidya Nehal	February 2015	1:20h	N (requested not to)	N N
11	Rajya	February 2015	1h	N (technical problems)	N
12	Radha	February 2015	3h	N (informal)	Y
13	Sunita	February 2015	1:05h	Y	Y
14	Malati	February 2015	1:30h	Y	Y
15	Bahiya	February 2015	1:15h	Y	Y

No.	Pseudonym	Date	Length	Recorded Y/N	Quoted in thesis Y/N
16	Dipti	February 2015	1:28h	Y	Y
17	Lina	February 2015	0:58h	Y	Y
18	Gurdeep	February 2015	0:57h	Y	Y
19	Kashi Padma Neha	February 2015	1:07h	Y	N N Y

Appendix II - List of collected data, according to organisation

Data type	Org1	Org2	Org3	Org4	Org5
Group interviews (2–3 members)	1	2	1	–	–
Single interviews	5	6	1	2	1
Members interviewed all together	8	9	3	2	1
(Participant) observation	- Staff meetings - External meetings	- Lunch time - Informal meetings	–	- External meeting	–
Text	- Webpage - Official publications: working papers, annual reports	- Webpage - Official publications: working papers, annual reports	- Webpage - Official publications: working papers, annual reports	- Webpage - Official publications: working papers, annual reports	- Webpage - Official publications: working papers, annual reports