

# FOSTERING CHANGE TOGETHER: LESSONS IN *Community Based Partnerships*



# Fostering Change Together: Lessons in Community Based Partnerships





## PREFACE

The stories included in this book are intentionally anecdotal in nature, and they reflect the day-to-day experiences and struggles of a group of place-based partnership brokers in West Bengal, India. They participated in a two-phase Partnership Brokers Training (PBT) in 2023, organized by Equiversity Foundation in collaboration with Partnership Brokers Association (PBA). PBA's four-day flagship training programme, PBT, was adapted in Bengali and delivered in six days in two phases. Despite attempts to limit the cohort to twenty, thirty participants joined. The PBT norm is one trainer per ten participants. We were two trainers, who were bilingual, i.e. can train in both English and Bangla. We went beyond the norm because this was an opportunity that came after many years of trying to dialogue on the partnership brokering frameworks in India, with people who were directly collaborating with the less privileged and the marginalized. There was only one dropout in phase 2, and that too against her will and despite her very frantic efforts to join. About one third of the participants were from families on the margins, who have now become associated with Equiversity Foundation; there were also local self-government representatives, who are elected by the people from their own communities. About a third were senior NGO workers from six NGOs, who were not necessarily members of the communities they support, but worked directly with them. The quest was to understand how far the frameworks that PBA has developed from practice were relevant for their context and their practice of collaboration, and how these frameworks can be further evolved based on their experience.

Collaboration was not something new to the participants. In their context, no one survives alone. In my perception, it's far less individualistic than the context I live in, which is urban and more privileged, though geographically in the same country and state. By legislation, the local self-government, which elects its members through citizens' votes, have fifty percent seats reserved for women. Yet there's rampant domestic violence, and the prevailing social norms reflect domination, patriarchy and unhealthy hierarchical practices, albeit with several champions and outliers trying their best to navigate the system based on their own ideals and values. As trainers, we were fortunate that some of these outliers were part of the cohort. So, the dialogue was largely on how far the frameworks, tools and processes are helpful for them, and how we can learn from their experience.

In the PBT training we speak about safe space and brave space. Mediation Specialist and Psychologist Daniel Shapiro<sup>1</sup> commented that it's not enough to be safe, we must create a brave space. The bravery of individuals operating in a situation of unabashed domination and control in their immediate realities, and yet managing to smile, have fun and enjoy some lighthearted moments, is humbling. My realization has been that as someone more privileged, I also live in a context of domination and control, but they do not affect my movements and choices in my day-to-day life to the extent that the participants experience.

I had quite a few moments of awe during the training. I am relating here a couple of them. We do an exercise where participants try to understand the perspectives of partners from different sectors, such as the Government, community, business, civil society organizations etc. Some of these sectors were represented in the room. They worked in mixed groups to understand the drivers, concerns and potential contributions of each sector in collaboration. One of the questions asked in the exercise was how each sector was perceived by others. This generated a highly emotional interaction as the local self-government representatives were shocked at how they were perceived. The group reflected the following day – this was the first time that they have been

able to speak to one another directly about their concerns, limitations and how they experience each other, and that they felt closer and safer for being able to do so. The local self-government representative, the one who was most upset, said that he reflected overnight that the stereotypes do not apply to everyone in the local self-government, and people like him have a responsibility to work internally to change these perceptions! Equity builds on empathy in collaborations – this is something I knew, but sitting in the circle listening to the reflections, I somehow felt it viscerally.

The second anecdote that almost had me choking was during a role play on conducting a health check. The partnership brokers facilitating the session were a senior male leader of the local self-government and a lady, also a local self-government representative, but of a lower tier and a new member of the Government. (In India, there's a fifty percent reservation for women in the local self-government, and political leadership tries to find various ways to keep the women in their place so that the male members, often their own husbands, continue to hold forte unchallenged). During preparations, the senior male partnership broker assigned a small role to the lady asking her to introduce the session and leave the rest to him. The lady did her part remarkably well and then kept trying to intervene as the senior male obviously was dominating the discussions and was ignoring the outlier voices. The lady did not give up. With some prompt from the trainer, which was also unusual as we do not intervene during role play, she stood up and started to write on the flip chart. She had good handwriting and was quite good at capturing discussions, skills she demonstrated earlier in the session. The dynamics changed slightly, as the participants divided their attention a bit between the flip chart and the senior leader. The main gain from this intervention was apparent during feedback, when the lady openly expressed that she felt that the discussions were being dominated and voices not heard, including her own. And the participants validated her observations. She was smiling ear to ear after the role play – this was her first experience of standing up to a senior male colleague. And the senior leader, during the circle reflection session, said that he realized

that he still needs to work on his arrogance to let go of it. We speak of transformational moments in partnering processes; it was such a privilege to experience one of them.

This collection of anecdotes highlights small changes in interventions that the partnership brokers took on when they tried to be intentional about their partnership brokering role. The hypothesis is that each of these steps, if consistently followed up, will contribute to addressing the power dynamics, the lack of openness and other challenges to promote principles that are more conducive for collaboration. I hope that the organizations will continue to support partnership brokering practices and there will be an opportunity to capture the stories a couple of years later.

Wishing all the best and in solidarity!

Bulbul Baksi

*Associate, Authorized Practitioner Trainer and Mentor,  
Partnership Brokers Association*

11 September 2025

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This book is the result of a collective journey of learning, reflection, and collaboration. It brings together the lived experiences, insights, and voices of community practitioners, local leaders, and partners who have tried to embrace the spirit of shared leadership and partnership-based change.

Our sincere thanks to all the contributors of this book for their commitment to learning and applying the principles of partnership in their work. Your courage, persistence, and creativity lie at the heart of this publication.

We extend special thanks to the Partnership Brokers Association (PBA) for initiating the idea of bringing partnership brokering frame works to place-based partnership brokers working with marginalized communities and local self-governments in West Bengal, India. We are grateful for the support from the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation and Porticus, that PBA secured for the programme, to make this endeavour possible.

Our special thanks to the Regional Convenors and leads of the Community Leadership in Collaborations programme, across different countries – Fiji in the Pacific and five countries in Africa, for exchanges, sharing and support as the programme was executed.

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shaped the programme's design and spirit. Thanks to Lola Gostelow and Catherine Russ for their unwavering support, encouragement and helping to navigate tricky challenges arising from different legal and administrative frameworks operating in the different countries.

Thanks to Anchita Ghatak, for her thoughtful editing, and sensitive shaping of these narratives so that they are lucid and readable, and to Ad Sonata, for bringing this publication to life with care and precision in print.

Our appreciation goes to the Equiversity Foundation team for anchoring the programme, facilitating learning spaces, and nurturing the practice of partnership across Birbhum, Kolkata, and the Sundaerbans.

Finally, our deepest gratitude goes to the communities who shared their truths, and trusted us with their stories. Your experiences remind us that lasting change begins when we listen deeply, act collectively, and grow together.

Bulbul Baksi & Anindita Majumdar

*Bulbul Baksi is an Associate of PBA, an Authorized Practitioner Trainer and mentor for the Accreditation Programme of PBA. She was a practice partner accompanying the programme in India and the Equiversity team. She led the training programmes on partnership brokering for the place-based partnership brokers in India.*

*Anindita Majumdar is the founder and Director of Equiversity Foundation and led the programme in India. She is an Accredited Partnership Broker and Associate of PBA. She co-trained with Bulbul in the partnership brokering training for the place-based partnership brokers, bringing in the place-based experience and knowledge to make the trainings fit for purpose for the participants.*

## About : PARTNERSHIP BROKERS ASSOCIATION (PBA)



PBA is the international professional body for those managing and developing collaboration processes. It is a not-for-profit, values-driven entity. It operates as a distributed organisation, and endeavours to keep the operating costs as low as possible. It has 100+ Associates in several countries and continents - Australia, New Zealand, Asia, Africa, Canada; 4000+ alumni and 300+ Accredited Partnership Brokers, based in 80 countries around the world. The commitment to ethical practice shapes the conduct of the practitioners who constitute PBA. They promote principled partnering as a foundation for equitable collaboration. PBA's way of working is a collaboration among Associates, who operate in internal or external partnership brokering roles. To promote high standards in partnership brokering, PBA runs the only accreditation programme in partnership brokering, setting an international benchmark for this new profession and strengthening its credibility as a paradigm. Continuous learning through reflection on practice is the cornerstone for evolving the discipline of partnership brokering. For more information, please visit the PBA website: [www.partnershipbrokers.org](http://www.partnershipbrokers.org).

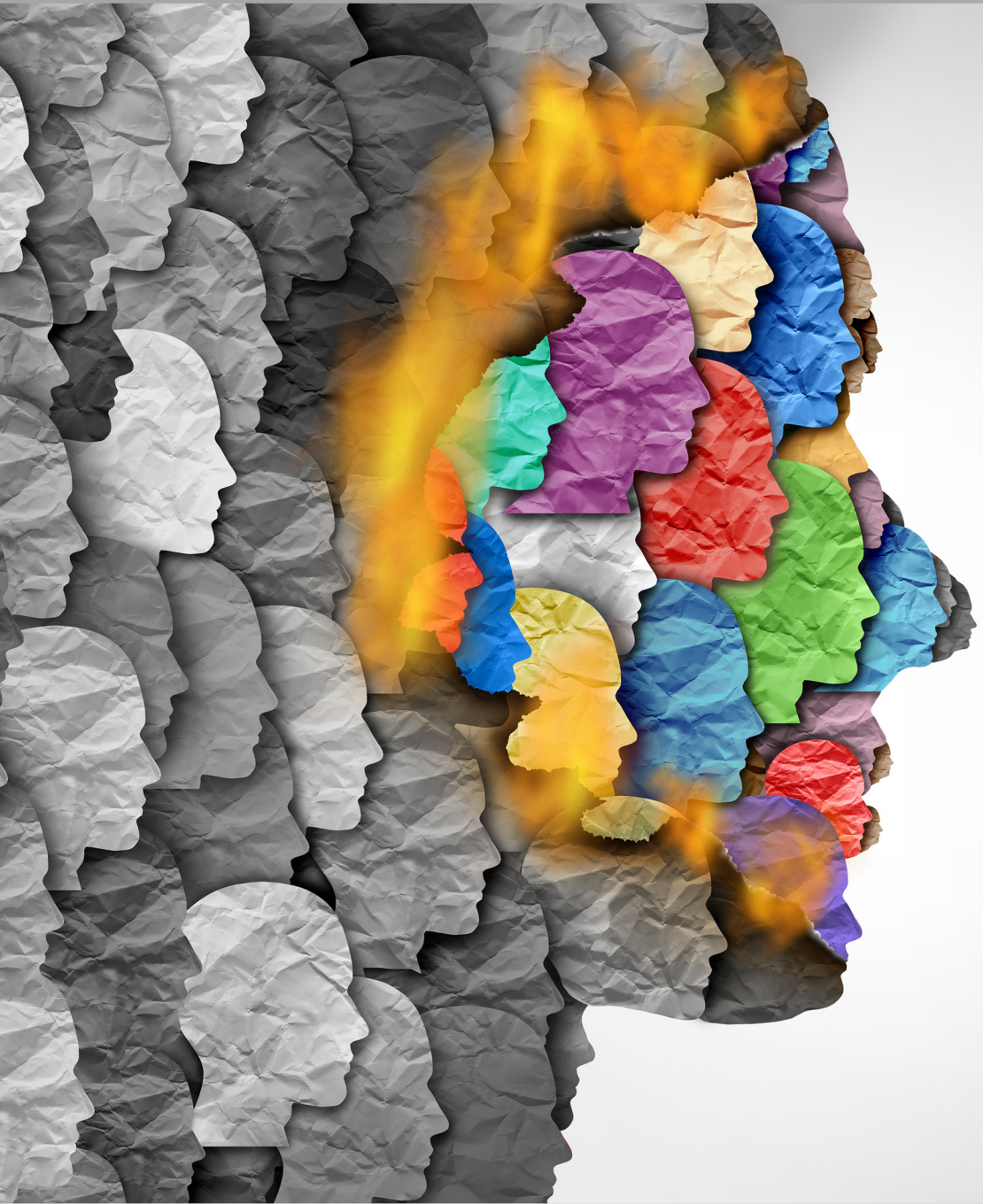
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## About : Equidiversity Foundation



Founded in 2016, Equidiversity Foundation is a feminist civil society organization based in Kolkata, dedicated to promoting gender equality, inclusive governance, and diversity. The foundation works across four districts of West Bengal — South 24 Parganas, Birbhum, Purulia, and others — to strengthen rural local self-governance through Panchayati Raj institutions, ensuring women's effective participation and leadership in decision-making.

Equidiversity envisions a world free from gender-based violence, where power and freedom are shared equally across genders. Its work focuses on creating systemic change through co-creation, strengthening women's leadership, engaging youth in gender equality, and developing replicable community-based models for inclusive governance.



# INTRODUCTION

## *Fostering Change Together: Lessons in Community-Based Partnerships*

This book brings together the voices, learnings, and reflections of community-based practitioners who immersed themselves in the practice of collaborative leadership adhering to principles of partnership. These individuals worked across diverse fields —child and women’s rights advocacy for sex workers, domestic workers, and women’s participation in governance. In doing so, they not only explored how to apply these principles, but also critically examined their relevance and impact within their local contexts.

At the core of this exploration remains the intersection of gender and partnership—two potent concepts, when meaningfully combined, can lead to collaborations that are more inclusive, equitable, and sustainable. Partnerships grounded in gender sensitivity and mutual respect create conditions for trust, openness, and authentic participation across gender identities. These, in turn, strengthen cooperation and help build resilient communities.

Yet, as a relatively new framework, the practice of partnering in this context is still evolving. Much of the initial focus was on experimentation within communities of practice, rather than systematic application in formal partnerships. While this exploratory phase yielded significant insights, the work of deepening and institutionalizing collaborative approaches remains ongoing.

The contributors to this book are deeply rooted community practitioners—individuals who live in and represent the communities they serve, navigating the rich and often contradictory realities of their socio-economic, political, and cultural contexts. Their experiences span from 2 to over 25 years. Many are affiliated with grassroots NGOs, working as community leaders and mobilizers. They walk a fine line—on one hand, addressing the challenges faced by their own communities and themselves as members of the community, and on the other, striving to break barriers and serve as role models within them. Some are team leads based in the field, while others are current or former elected representatives who hold influence within rural local governance systems. A few contributors are members of local women’s groups, actively confronting gender inequality and carving out spaces to raise their voices.

Most of these practitioners operate as internal partnership brokers—facilitating collaboration, negotiation, and trust-building within their own communities. Team leaders, depending on the situation, also take on the role of external brokers, linking community voices with institutions, administrative bodies, and broader systems of governance.

Over the course of two years, the **Community Leadership in Collaborations (CLC)** Programme supported this journey through intensive engagement with two distinct cohorts. The programme aimed to:

1. **Strengthen local leadership capacity** by building skills, confidence, and collective agency to foster collaborative change.

2. **Develop models of community-driven partnerships** by nurturing networks for connection, shared learning, and advocacy that empower multi-stakeholder engagement.
3. **Shift the broader development ecosystem** by repositioning communities—from passive recipients to active leaders—based on their lived experiences and locally grounded solutions.
4. **Cohort Engagement and Evolution**
  - **Cohort 1** began with NGO and community practitioners and gradually expanded to include grassroots leaders such as women’s group members and local governance representatives. This group brought together 29 participants from diverse backgrounds.
  - **Cohort 2** comprised 24 community-level practitioners from Equidiversity Foundation, joined by four members from the first cohort who returned in mentoring roles—bringing continuity and peer-led support.

### **Regions we worked in**

The stories are from Birbhum district, Sundarbans and Kolkata.

### **Birbhum**

Birbhum is predominantly rural (87%), with agriculture as the primary livelihood, yet marked by seasonal unemployment and persistent poverty. Adivasi, Dalit, and Muslim communities constitute a significant share of the population and face systemic socio-economic marginalization. According to the 2011 Census, the district had 3.5 million people, a sex ratio of 956 females per 1,000 males, with Scheduled Castes comprising 29.5% and Scheduled Tribes 6.9%. Literacy stands at 70.68%, with a sharp gender gap—male literacy at 76.92% and female literacy at 64.14%. Women’s workforce participation remains low, constrained by patriarchal norms, while migration for brick kiln and construction work supplements household incomes.

## Sundarbans

The Sundarbans, the world's largest mangrove ecosystem, spread across India and Bangladesh, acts as a natural buffer against cyclones, erosion, and sea-level rise while sustaining rich biodiversity and local livelihoods. The Indian Sundarbans are mainly located within the South 24 Parganas district. This climate-fragile deltaic region depends heavily on subsistence farming, fishing, and forest resources, yet poverty remains widespread. Recurrent cyclones, salinity intrusion, erosion, and isolation drive economic precarity, migration, and market dependence. Women bear a double burden of unpaid care work and income generation, often through prawn seed collection or low-paid wage work, while facing heightened risks of trafficking, early marriage, and limited access to health and education. According to the 2011 Census, South 24 Parganas recorded a sex ratio of 956 females per 1,000 males (child sex ratio 963), with sharp literacy gaps—urban female literacy at 84% compared to 69% in rural areas.

## Kolkata

Kolkata is a dense urban metropolis marked by stark contrasts between middle-class affluence and poverty in slums and informal settlements. Its economy is primarily service-oriented, combining formal and informal employment, with gender indicators stronger than in rural districts—reflected in higher female literacy and workforce participation—though wage disparities and occupational segregation persist. Migrant labourers, domestic workers, and poor urban women remain highly vulnerable. According to Census 2011, the district had about 4.5 million people, a population density of 24,252 per km<sup>2</sup>, and a low sex ratio of 908 females per 1,000 males. Literacy is high at 86.31% (male 88.34%, female 84.06%), while the religious composition is 76.5% Hindu and 20.6% Muslim.

*(Sources: Census 2011 India; indiastatpublications.com)*

## **Defining ‘Community’ in Context**

The communities involved were primarily rural or peri-urban, with deeply rooted systems of caste, kinship, and customary practices influencing everyday life. Agriculture formed the economic backbone, relying on shared labour, land, and water resources. This context often reinforced community interdependence. Local governance bodies like Gram Panchayats were central in resolving conflicts and managing collective resources.

Through cycles of learning, experimentation, and reflection, the CLC Program helped shape a living, evolving model of collaborative partnering—one where communities are not just consulted, but actively lead processes of change. While this book documents important field-level insights, it also serves as an invitation: to continue learning, adapting, and deepening practices that center partnership and community leadership as cornerstones of transformative development.

Anindita Majumdar

*Regional Convenor, India, CLC Programme*

## REGIONS WE WORKED IN

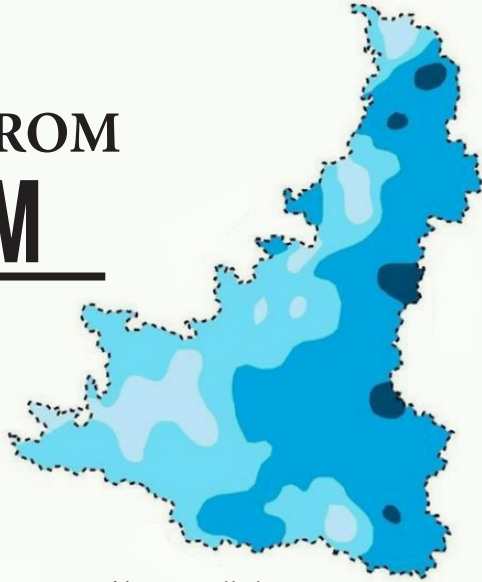


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# STORIES FROM BIRBHUM



## *Birbhum's Ballad*

*Amidst red earth where palash blooms,  
Through laterite trails and Baul's tunes,  
Birbhum breathes in rhythms old,  
Of farmers' toil and traders bold.  
Rivers weave through paddy's spread,  
In fairground echoes, legends tread.  
From terracotta tales in temple spires,  
To Santiniketan's artful fires.  
Power shifts in whispered schemes,  
Of ruling hands and broken dreams.  
Mines and crafts, a fragile thread,  
Between the past and what's ahead.  
Mango groves and flash foods compete,  
In voices fierce on dusty streets.  
Yet hearts beat to the drum's refrain—  
Birbhum rises, sings again.*


*Anonymously collected*



Baul singers perform at Shantiniketan, Birbhum

## Listening to Lead: Transforming Masculinity in Local Governance

Syed Golam Shamsuddin Ahmed\*

 It is not just that power in rural local governance in West Bengal rests generally with the male elected representatives with women playing a proxy role, but to complicate matters, such politics is shaped through interference and 'guidance' from the political party in power.

"I am Syed Rafique Ahmed, a member of Daskalgram Kareya Gram Panchayat. I am considered a no-nonsense person with an archaic mindset. In politics for 30 years, I never felt it was necessary to consult others or give women colleagues primacy in a workspace. I believed that women were best suited for household work and children ought to follow orders and dictates. Any difference of opinion with me would lead to angry altercations. In the one and half years that I have been associated with Equidiversity Foundation, I have realized the importance of dialogue and listening to different perspectives. I am more encouraging towards my women colleagues and I attend meetings and workshops organized by EDF with a lot of enthusiasm. My participation in a residential workshop led me to reflect on my style of leadership and how alienated I was from my family by my own design. Nowadays I am more open and forthcoming in sharing household chores with my wife and lending an ear to my daughter. After a year, I attended back-to-back residential

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\* Syed Golam Shamsuddin Ahmed (Dalim) is an elected member of the Village Council with 30 years of experience in local politics. He represents the Muslim minority community:

‘partnership building’ workshops. I discussed the workshop with my wife and connected her with Equiversity Foundation. She became a member of Basundhara Nari Jagaran Committee - a women's collective. Villagers do not have clear conception about the activities of NGO and community women from my community hesitate to participate. My wife plays the role of engaging with women through the Nari Jagaran Committee (NJC). Now more women in the area are participating actively in ‘Para Boithak’ (neighbourhood preparatory meetings prior to the annual voters’ interaction with the Gram Panchayat or Village Council). I have been able to establish my influence as a leader in the area because of that. I feel it is important to establish my argument and thought and reflect that in my work and activities”.

### **Learnings**


*Equity requires challenging ingrained biases, especially regarding gender roles. Hence it is a time-taking process. Equitable partnership involves not only giving women a seat at the table but also valuing their contributions equally.*

*Transparency in partnerships, particularly in areas with political sensitivities, builds trust. By openly communicating his transformation, Rafique enabled his community to gain trust in EDF, promoting a positive perception of the organization.*

*Sustainable partnerships require commitment, especially when change demands personal and social shifts. The level of commitment depends on understanding the benefit from such engagement.*

## Nurturing Trust, One Family at a Time

Soma Ghosh\*

adinagar village, located under the Das Kalgram Kareya II Gram Panchayat, hosts an adolescent girls' group formed by us. One active member of this group, Tuhina Khatun, stopped attending sessions in July 2024. When I inquired, other members said they had called her, but she has refused to come. I later called her, and she told me, “Didi, I won’t attend the sessions anymore,” and hung up the phone.

After the session, I visited her home. Her mother explained that Tuhina was a grown up girl now (16 years old) and would no longer attend such activities. I discussed the issue with her mother, explaining the purpose of the group, how it benefits the adolescent girls, and what parents can gain from it. I also spoke with her father to understand his perspective. Initially, he was unwilling to hear me out but after our discussion, he acknowledged the importance of the group.

I provided references from individuals in the village and informed her parents about our regular guardians' meetings, requesting their presence. As scheduled, a guardians' meeting was held where Tuhina's mother participated. During the meeting, other parents shared the positive changes they had observed in their daughters due to the group. Hearing these testimonials, Tuhina's mother reconsidered her stance.

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*With 2 years' experience in community engagement, Soma works with young girls navigating her own challenges as a young woman.*

She said that as parents they never really knew what discussions took place with the girls and that she had never truly considered the mental and emotional aspects of their daughter in the way the meeting led her to understand.

Afterwards, I asked Tuhina if she wanted to rejoin the group. When Tuhina expressed her interest, her mother agreed. Her father also had no objections. Now, Tuhina regularly attends the sessions.

### ***Learning & Application***

*Building Trust and Mutual Respect: The practitioner approached Tuhina's family with respect and sought to understand their concerns rather than imposing solutions. By engaging both parents in discussions, the facilitator demonstrated genuine care for Tuhina's well-being and the family's perspective.*

*Effective Communication: The practitioner used clear and empathetic communication to explain the purpose and benefits of the adolescent girls' group. This included using examples, testimonials, and references of community members to address misconceptions and build understanding.*

*Inclusivity and Equity: By actively engaging both parents and ensuring that their voices were heard, the facilitator created an inclusive dialogue that addressed the concerns of all stakeholders involved.*


*Fostering Shared Goals and Understanding: The practitioner framed the adolescent group as a shared opportunity for both the girls and their parents to benefit. By emphasizing the positive impact on the growth and development of girls in the group, the facilitator aligned the programme's objectives with the parents' aspirations for Tuhina.*

## Stories from Birbhum

*Promoting Collaborative Problem-Solving: The guardian meeting allowed parents to collaborate by sharing experiences and discussing the group's impact. This collective engagement helped address Tuhina's mother's reservations through peer influence and shared learning.*

## Shifting Ground through Listening, and Persuasion

Sumati Malakar\*

he political situation in Kirnahar II Gram Panchayat is highly complex due to changes in political leadership, and this makes partnership-based work very challenging. The new leadership perceives their word as final and there is a tendency to discard whatever their predecessor had agreed to do.

When the Panchayat body (local governance) was restructured following election, Equidiversity Foundation organized training sessions for the new members. However, the political leader of Kirnahar II Gram Panchayat stated, “My members don’t need any training. Too much training will make them overconfident.”

Using the principles of partnership, I explained that training would enhance their understanding of their responsibilities, enabling them to manage local projects effectively. This, in turn, would ease his workload and increase his chances of securing votes. After further persuasion, he agreed and instructed the members to attend the training. As a result, I successfully organized the training sessions.

What stood out most during this experience was the change in power dynamics. In the past, such pushback would have forced me to withdraw or hand over the matter to my seniors. This time, the principles and skills

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*Her own life situation had trained Sumati to avoid conflict and confrontation of any kind fearing escalation. In 3 years of community based experience this was a moment where she decided to persist.*

rooted in collaborative leadership gave me the confidence, language, and patience to stay engaged, shift the narrative, and eventually arrive at shared ground.


### ***Learnings***

*This experience reinforced that partnership is not just about collaboration—it is about strategic negotiation, empathy, and shared ownership.*

*Power in these contexts is rarely linear; it must be navigated with care. Building partnerships in politically volatile spaces requires deep listening, contextual understanding, and a willingness to reframe conversations in a way that aligns with the interests of all parties. The shift in the practitioner's attitude came not from confrontation, but from appealing to his aspirations and creating a sense of co-ownership. The process also reaffirmed that even in difficult contexts, when we centre dignity, agency, and mutual respect, partnerships can move — from resistance to cooperation—transforming both relationships and outcomes.*

## Grounding Leadership in Reality: The Making of a Stronger Nari Jagaran Committee

Jhuma Ganguly Hazra\*

The Annual General Meeting of the Nari Jagaran Committee (Women's Empowerment Committee) formed by women in the community to address violence against women of Kirnahar - II Gram Panchayat takes place in August. However, the members of the NJC show little inclination to take responsibility for NJC's tasks or to establish a proper structure for its functioning. Despite repeated discussions led by EDF workers, no significant progress had been made. Most NJC members express concerns such as, "We cannot spare time," "What shall we gain from these meetings?" "How shall we manage repeated travel expenses, and who will bear those costs?" As a result, meetings often failed, the NJC remained stagnant, and EDF workers experienced a sense of underlying tension, fearing failure.

Additionally, the tasks that were supposed to be completed in the region with NJC's involvement had seen little progress. To address this, EDF held discussions with field workers at their office, reflecting deeply on the challenges and accepting them constructively. What emerged was our own anxiety to push decisions and focus on 'delivery of outcomes', that was pre-determined. We realized we needed to take a step back and understand and observe more.

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*Jhuma has 24 years of community based experience. As a team leader the struggle is to find a balance between stepping in and letting go.*

A subsequent NJC meeting was organized to foster a sense of partnership and equality. We created a comfortable environment for open discussions. It became evident that most members belonged to economically marginalized families, and their concerns were validated. This gave them a sense of importance.

The discussion focused on how a properly functioning NJC could benefit both their personal interests and help local women escape domestic violence. We discussed how strong collectives support from the administration, and EDF could aid their growth and development. Slowly it made the members realize that having their own organization in the area would bring them opportunities and enhance their importance within the community and their families.

Following this, NJC members themselves initiated another meeting and expressed a desire to establish NJC's structure based on co-created regulations. They sought EDF's support to facilitate the meeting. In this meeting, they formed a 15-member core committee and decided to strengthen the NJC further by forming a management committee, that will create a fund through contributions, and opening a bank account if needed. They requested EDF's support for at least six months to achieve these objectives.

The members also stressed on how EDF can also guide and support them to improve their income.

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\* NJC : *Nari Jagaran Committee*

### **Learnings**

*Understand Context and Adapt to Stakeholders' Realities: Recognizing the socioeconomic realities of partners is essential for providing solutions. Effective partnerships require understanding and addressing the real-life that barriers stakeholders face. This understanding helps create practical, empathetic solutions that encourage participation.*

*Demonstrate the Value of Partnership (1+1+1=10): Highlighting the tangible benefits of collaboration motivates stakeholders. Stakeholders are more likely to engage when they see how a partnership aligns with their interests and offers clear benefits.*

*Encourage Ownership and Empower Stakeholders: Partnerships succeed when stakeholders feel empowered to take responsibility and ownership of tasks rather than relying entirely on external facilitators.*

## Turning Disengagement into Dialogue: A Lesson in Meeting Youth Halfway

Arnab Mukherjee\*

In the Harnandanpur village, under Jamna Gram Panchayat, EDF has a youth group consisting of teenagers aged 17–18 years. For some time, it had become increasingly difficult to keep them engaged during sessions. Even though EDF workers visited them, the boys were reluctant to sit for the sessions and often made it clear that they wouldn't leave their hangout spot. Despite several attempts, the workers had to return without conducting the sessions.

When I heard about this, I decided to visit them myself. However, when I reached the meeting spot, I found no more than 3–4 people present, which made me quite concerned. A few days later, when I tried conducting another session, they were highly inattentive in the session and started disrupting. At that moment, I felt quite frustrated.

Later, after receiving training on partnership-building, I began reflecting on my strategies and challenges at work, which helped me understand the problem better. A few days later, I visited them again for a session. This time, they openly told me that they didn't enjoy the sessions. I acknowledged their feelings, saying, "It's true; we don't always enjoy everything. So, today, let's discuss a game." This approach excited them, and they began paying attention. Gradually, they started

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*Arnab realizes the huge gap that exists between this formal education on rural studies and what he had to grapple on the ground. He is now intentionally applying theories and frameworks to his work and life as a way to grow and learn.*

opening up about their desires and what they wanted to learn from us. Their expressed needs were topics related to online games; learn about menstruation; male & female reproductive systems; managing their emotions etc. I planned sessions specifically addressing these topics and started engaging with them more frequently through discussions and interactions.

What significantly helped us build a partnership with them was understanding each other's interests, having open conversations, and building mutual trust. Since then, they have regularly stayed in touch with us, participated in sessions, and shared their thoughts openly.

Understanding their needs has also made it easier for me to prepare sessions collaboratively with them, ensuring my work faces less challenges.

### ***Learning***

*Fostering Respect and Trust: Empowering the teenagers to voice their preferences made them feel valued and motivated to participate.*

*Practicing Active Listening and Open Communication: Open and honest communication was essential in uncovering the underlying reasons for disengagement. By actively listening to the teenagers and inviting them to share their thoughts, the practitioner could identify their genuine interests and concerns. This approach not only built rapport but also demonstrated a sincere commitment to understanding their needs.*

*Building Shared Goals through Collaboration: Partnerships are most effective when all stakeholders, including young people, are actively involved in shaping the goals and activities in ways that reflect their priorities.*

*Strengthening Relationships through Consistency: By showing up consistently and being responsive, the practitioner built trust over time. This ongoing interaction fostered a sense of connection, reliability, and accountability—key elements in any successful and sustainable partnership.*

## Negotiating Power, Enabling Participation: A Panchayat Partnership Story

Tarun Banerjee\*

Since 2017, Equiversity Foundation (EDF) has been actively engaged with the Das Kalgram Kareya II Gram Panchayat under the Nanoor Panchayat Samiti. In Birbhum—a district known for its intense political dynamics and volatility—Gram Panchayats are often heavily influenced by political leadership rather than by the elected representatives alone.

Following the most recent Panchayat elections, the entire elected body at Das Kalgram Kareya II was replaced, and a new set of political leaders took charge. Recognizing this transition as both a challenge and an opportunity, I initiated a meeting with the newly elected Panchayat head to discuss decentralized, bottom-up planning processes. The idea was to organize community-led meetings—Para Baithaks (neighbourhood meetings), Gram Sansad Sabhas (cluster-level meetings), Gram Sabhas (village assemblies), Shishu Sansad Sabhas (children’s parliaments), Mahila Sabhas (women’s meetings), and trainings for Panchayat members on participatory planning and gender budgeting.

The elected head welcomed the proposal and acknowledged the importance of these activities. However, he suggested that I also speak with the non-elected political leaders who guide decision-making across clusters of villages.

I followed up by contacting these leaders, scheduled a meeting, and

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\* With 17 years of community based experience, Tarun has been brokering partnerships with Gram Panchayats to make them gender inclusive. He has been with Equiversity Foundation since inception.

visited the Panchayat office. When I presented the idea, in the presence of the political leadership, the Panchayat head, and several other influential stakeholders I was met with scepticism. They questioned the relevance of our work and how it benefited the community.

In response, I shared EDF's mission, values, and our work in the region. Though the atmosphere was initially tense, I patiently answered numerous questions and clarified our intentions. By the end of the conversation, the tone shifted, and they suggested reconvening for a deeper discussion.

In the next meeting, I focused on aligning our approach with the Panchayat's development goals and referred to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to highlight the importance of partnership and collective action. I also clarified that while the Gram Panchayat is institutionally required to hold Gram Sansad and Gram Sabha meetings, EDF's involvement could support effective implementation and ensure inclusive participation.

Still, the political head expressed resistance, arguing that they could manage such activities independently. We discussed the underlying concerns and perceived threats until we (they?) agreed to hold another meeting—this time with the Panchayat Secretary, who plays a critical administrative role in planning and reporting.

That meeting brought together the acting Secretary, the Nirman Sahayak, and other Panchayat members. After introductions, I stepped back and allowed the Secretary to highlight how neighbourhood meetings had previously supported better Gram Panchayat planning. This helped reduce resistance and opened up a more constructive dialogue.

Eventually, there was consensus: a collaborative approach would benefit all. The Secretary asked me to return for follow-up discussions, after which we were given the go-ahead to take full responsibility for organizing the meetings. Dates were finalized, elected members were informed, and EDF facilitated training sessions on planning and budgeting for Panchayat members.

### **Where We Stand Now**

Neighbourhood meetings have already begun, and both Gram Sansad meetings and Gram Sabhas meetings are scheduled to be held fairly soon. What started as a contested proposal has evolved into a shared process of planning, learning, and cooperation—grounded in trust and driven by community participation.


#### ***Learnings:***

*Persistence and Relationship-Building: Building trust and understanding takes time and persistence. The key shift was finding alignment between EDF's goals and the Gram Panchayat's obligations, creating a foundation for mutual understanding.*

*Transparent Communication: The practitioner maintained open communication throughout the process, explaining the rationale behind the proposed activities, addressing concerns, and seeking input from the leadership and staff. They were also honest about the need for urgency and how EDF's involvement could enhance efficiency.*

## Beyond the Party Line: Leading with a Partnership Mindset

Amritkrishna Ghosh\*

 I am Amritkrishna Ghosh, popularly known as Uttam. I am 60 years old and have spent half of my life as a political leader in Kaichara village under the Jamna Gram Panchayat. My family includes my wife, son, daughter-in-law, and grandchildren. I cultivate a small piece of farmland to support my household.

I have always been passionate about ensuring that women become self-reliant, which led me to get involved with the activities of Equidiversity Foundation (EDF). Together, we explored ways to strengthen the women in my area, always seeking their input and advice. Through EDF's gender and leadership training programs, I collaborated with political representatives to significantly increase the budget for women, children, and community development, as well as for education and public health initiatives within the Gram Panchayat.

I played a pivotal role in forming the Jamna Singha Bahini Nari Jagaran Committee, which is a women's group that aims to reduce domestic violence against women by initiating discussions at both communities and Panchayat levels. I have supported women by organizing awareness

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*A Political Leader with 30 years of experience in community of practice, Amritakrishna Ghosh has undergone training gender and partnership as part of embedding of partnership lens within EDF*

camps, neighbourhood meetings, and Para Baithak (neighbourhood) sessions, providing guidance to empower them. As a result, the Jamna Singha Bahini Nari Jagaran Committee appointed me as their advisor. During the Samya Mela (Equality Fair), I assisted women with fundraising and wall writing, and took on the responsibility of buying the vegetables and helping with cooking for 3,000 people. With the help of EDF, I have been able to support the journey to self-reliance of many women in my area as they fought oppression and worked to create a new life for themselves.

I have consistently raised issues concerning women and children at the Gram Panchayat and party levels, advocating for their resolution. However, not everyone has agreed with my views, and I have faced challenges in achieving all my goals. These disagreements led to setbacks in my position within the party, leaving me inactive for a period. My involvement with EDF also brought criticism, with some labelling me as an “NGO agent”.

On a personal level, I believe in openly discussing all matters with my family and respecting their opinions.

I continue to advocate for women's rights within the party, and my efforts have been finally recognized. The party has welcomed me back mainly due to my strong reputation in the community. The party's poor performance in my area in the last two elections made the leadership realize that excluding me may have contributed to poor the results.

### ***Important Learnings Emerging***


*As a political leader collaborating with an NGO, the practitioner has received both support and criticism. His experience highlights the importance of navigating political landscapes with impartiality and resilience, emphasizing that community-focused goals should remain the priority over political affiliations.*

*Equity in partnership requires addressing systemic barriers so that all community members, especially underrepresented groups, can benefit equally. The practitioner's role shows how a leader can prioritize equity.*

*Standing by principles of equity and inclusion often requires courage. Consistent advocacy for equity and rights even at personal and political cost, shows how trust, credibility, and relational leadership can help shift systems over time.*

## Shared Burden, Shared Solution: Partnership in Local Development

Sumana Majumdar\*

am Sumona, associated with an NGO Nari O Shishu Kalyan Kendra.

After receiving training on partnership, I returned to the field and met with the head of a Gram Panchayat. I introduced myself and explained the purpose of our meeting. A significant portion of the village population consists of migrant workers, and they often lack awareness about social security schemes. Our goal was to address their issues and ensure that the Gram Panchayat Development Plan allocated a budget accordingly.

Initially, the Panchayat members were unaware of these concerns and were hesitant to engage. They mentioned that such matters must be raised in the Gram Sabha and local community meetings. However, they pointed out that people rarely attend these meetings, making it challenging for the Panchayat to take action.

Applying the principles of partnership, I assured them that we would mobilize marginalized migrant workers to actively participate in Gram Sabha and community meetings. I also explained the benefits of

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\* The writer works for Nari O Shishu Kalyan Kendra, Birbhum. She is from the community and has been working for 15 years as a community based practitioner

an inclusive development plan—if the Panchayat addressed common issues like ration card delays and Aadhaar card errors, it would gain build the community's trust. A more engaged and responsible community would, in turn, reduce the burden on the Panchayat.

Recognizing this mutual benefit, the Panchayat head agreed to consider our proposal, provided we could increase public participation. We took responsibility and organized street plays highlighting social issues. We also collaborated with volunteers to spread awareness about the importance of attending Gram Sabha meetings.

In Goltikuri, for example, child marriage rates were high, and many girls had dropped out of school. Due to a lack of solar streetlights, instances of child abuse had risen, yet the Panchayat was unaware of these issues. We conveyed to the people that unless they voiced their concerns in official forums, solutions would remain out of reach. By emphasizing the direct impact of their participation, we encouraged greater community engagement.

Through this mediation, we successfully brought both the Panchayat and marginalized communities to a common platform. The Panchayat members even invited us to five Gram Sabha meetings to jointly facilitate discussions and ensure active participation.

Working with partnership principles gave me greater confidence and allowed me to communicate the value of collaboration effectively. Equal participation among all stakeholders reduced my workload and risks, making the process smoother and more sustainable. As a result, the Gram Panchayat has invited us to contribute to future development initiatives, strengthening our long-term partnership.

### *Emerging Lessons*

*This experience reinforced the value of mutual accountability and inclusive engagement as core partnering principles. Approaching the Gram Panchayat not as an external actor but as a collaborator and not as an external actor, the practitioner was able to shift the conversation from reluctance to shared responsibility.*

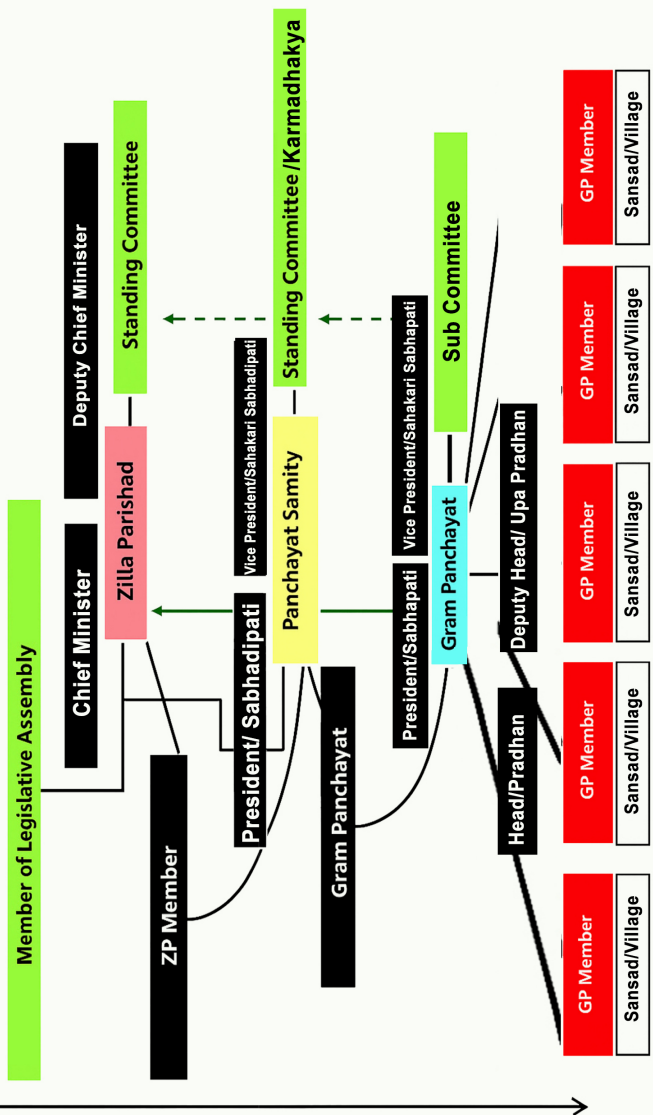
*The hesitation of Panchayat members stemmed not from unwillingness, but from a disconnect with the realities of marginalized groups—especially migrant workers. Applying a partnership lens meant acknowledging their constraints while offering solutions.*

*By committing to mobilize community participation in Gram Sabhas and local meetings, the practitioner demonstrated a willingness to share the burden of outreach. This built trust and opened a space for cooperation. Importantly, it showed that sustainable change emerges not through one-sided demands, but through co-creating strategies that reflect the lived realities and capacities of all partners involved.*

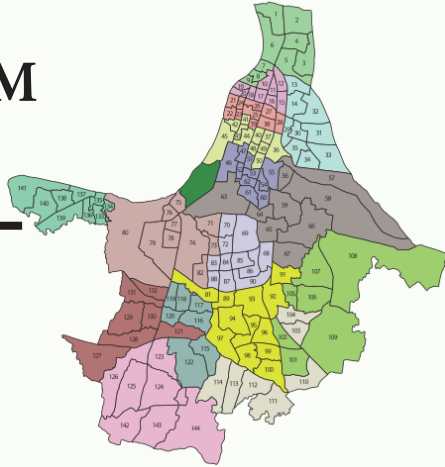
Three Tier Panchayati Raj System  
(Decentralized Structure)

Top Down Approach

Bottom Up Approach



# STORIES FROM KOLKATA



## *Kolkata's Call*

*Through Howrah's arch and tramlines old,  
Where stories hum in hues of gold,  
Hooghly sings to ships that roam,  
In dawn's embrace, they find their home.  
Bazaars awake with chai's embrace,  
Adda flows in time's embrace.  
Poets dream on College streets,  
As conch-shell prayers, Azaan and traffic meet.*


*From palatial past to factories worn,  
In slogans loud, new hopes are born.  
Durga's drums and midnight trains,  
Through loss and love, the soul remains.  
A rebel's fire, a painter's stroke,  
The city breathes in books and smoke.  
Kolkata laughs, Kolkata cries,  
Yet in its heart, the spirit flies.*

*Anonymously collected*



## Shared Steps Toward Healing: Partnering with Survivors Through Trust

Jinia Chatterjee\*

ndergoing the Partnership Building and Subsequent Communication and Understanding Group Dynamics training have significantly helped me understand various situations and work on them more effectively.

I work as a caseworker in my organization, primarily handling cases of domestic violence. One of the biggest challenges I faced was witnessing women endure continuous abuse—being beaten, insulted, and humiliated—yet still unable to leave their marital homes, even after repeated counseling. I often felt frustrated, wondering why they endured so much pain but refused to leave. It felt like they did not value my advice.

During the communication training, we participated in an activity on empathy. We were given three pieces of paper and asked to write:

The name of the most beloved person in our lives; the name of our favourite place, where we feel the happiest; our favourite activity, something we love doing the most.

Once everyone had written, we were instructed to tear the paper with our beloved person's name and imagine that this person no longer existed in our lives. The feeling was deeply painful. Accepting the loss of the most cherished person was incredibly difficult.

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*The writer has 2 years of community based experience working with women and girls*

Next, we had to tear the paper with the name of our favorite place accepting that we could never go there again. Finally, we were told to tear the paper with our favourite activity, accepting that we would never be able to do it again. This exercise was emotionally overwhelming. It was painful beyond words, and my hands trembled as I tore the papers. I felt an indescribable sorrow, almost as if I was crying inside.

Afterward, the facilitators explained the purpose of this exercise. They made us realize that when we tell a survivor to leave her home (which might be her most cherished place), cut ties with her husband (who might be the most beloved person in her life), or give up on running a household (which could be her most fulfilling role), she experiences the same profound pain and emptiness that we just felt. That's why, despite facing extreme abuse and humiliation, she struggles to leave.

At that moment, I truly understood—while it may be clear to me that a survivor should leave, it is not as simple for her. Since then, whenever I handle such cases, I approach survivors with this newfound understanding. I connect with their pain instead of simply telling them what to do. I explain their situation to them, but I leave the final decision to them. And no matter what they decide, I accept it without judgment. This shift has made my work much easier, reduced my own emotional burden, and helped survivors trust me more. They now openly share their hopes and fears with me, building a bond of trust and confidence.

During the training, we also discussed dependency. Often, survivors become dependent on us, which is not our goal. Our role is to empower them, not make them reliant on us.

I shared an example during the training – there was a survivor I had accompanied to the police station several times. However, even now, whenever she needs to go, she refuses to go alone and insists that I accompany her. Once, I encouraged her to go alone, thinking it would help build her confidence and reduce her dependency on me. I questioned why she couldn't go alone.

The facilitators pointed out that while my intention was right, I needed to talk to her and understand what fears were holding her back. Realizing my mistake, I called her to our office and discussed her concerns. She shared her anxieties, and we explored ways she could overcome them. Soon after, she found the courage to go to the police station on her own.

The training also involved several role-playing exercises to help us understand how to communicate effectively. One scenario involved a mother and her son visiting a caseworker. The son wanted to quit studying and start his own business, but his mother strongly opposed the idea, fearing he would waste money. The son tried to explain, but the mother refused to listen, as she had never supported his requests for money.

Initially, I thought the caseworker should simply advise the mother to listen to her son. However, through the facilitators' discussions, I realized that instead of focusing on what the mother was saying, we should understand why she felt that way. By addressing her fears and concerns, it would be easier to help her manage them.

This training clarified many crucial aspects of my work. My primary role as a caseworker is to connect with people, and this training has made that task much easier. By understanding survivors' emotions, fears, and challenges, I can now communicate with them more effectively, ultimately making my work more meaningful and impactful.

### *Learnings*

#### *Building Trust Through Mutual Respect:*

*The practitioner's journey began with a shift in mindset—from frustration to empathy. Recognizing the importance of respecting lived experiences of survivors laid the foundation for genuine trust and enabling deeper, more honest conversations. Trust is central to effective partnerships, especially when working with vulnerable groups.*

#### *Centring Equity and Empowerment:*

*True partnerships aim to reduce power imbalances. By acknowledging survivors as experts in their own lives, the practitioner moved toward practices that fostered autonomy rather than dependency. This change empowered survivors to make informed, self-directed choices.*

#### *Practising Deep Listening:*

*Rather than imposing predefined solutions, the practitioner embraced active listening—a core principle of partnership. This allowed for a clearer understanding of the emotional and contextual factors shaping survivors' decisions, strengthening relevance and responsiveness.*

#### *Embracing Flexibility and Co-creation:*


*When initial strategies failed, the practitioner adapted their approach. Moving from directive advice to collaborative dialogue created a space where survivors could meaningfully participate in shaping their own paths forward—essential for inclusive and durable partnerships.*

#### *Commitment to Continuous Learning:*

*The practitioner's transformation reflects a core partnering principle namely: commitment to reflection and growth. Training not only enhanced their capacity to support survivors but also improved their own emotional resilience—deepening their effectiveness as a partner in change.*

## Voices That Shifted the Room: How Women Leaders Protected Our Space

Anindita Majumdar\*

e at Equiversity Foundation (EDF), work in politically sensitive environments in the districts of West Bengal. The situation becomes very complicated before any election process. We witness regular clashes and violence before and after every election.

On one such occasion, in the village of Dakshin Gangadharpur, our women's tailoring group had been housed in an abandoned girls' hostel for minority Muslim girls with the understanding that they would leave once the hostel started functioning again. However, they enormous pressure from a local political party who mobilized the community to suggest that these women had forcefully taken over the place. Our community leaders engaged in dialogues and de-escalated the situation only to find later on that a number of criminal cases like sexual assault on our NJC members and theft had been lodged against some members of the political party in the dispute and the Nari Jagaran Committee (women's groups mobilized by EDF) members were being forced to file these false complaints by members of another political party.

The NJC members who are local residents, were being pressurized to give false evidence for crimes that had not happened. They were

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*\*Anindita Majumdar is the Founder of Equiversity Foundation, Kolkata, West Bengal, India and has 25 years of community based practice*

also being asked to be part of political rallies supporting a particular political party. Our senior colleagues were told that if EDF wanted to work in the community, they would have to follow the dictates of these powerful political party.

As an organization that does not align with any political party, we decided to resist this and share our concerns.

Senior colleagues of the organization initiated one-on-one dialogues with political leaders to seek assurance from influential people that we would not be pulled into this. In spite of this, the pressure tactics continued at the local level. Community leaders who are also voters in the locality, were under tremendous pressure from the political leaders to step up and show allegiance as party supporters.

We abandoned the strategy of seeking support from the higher levels and decided to meet local leaders, the NJC members and other women's groups. A meeting was organized. We shared our values openly and explained why we maintain a non-partisan stand. We discussed why our community leaders can have their individual political beliefs and ideology but why they cannot use that identity to influence people. We also made it clear if we were involved in the legal case we would speak the truth in case of an enquiry, sharing exactly what had taken place. We also said that if there was continuous pressure, we would have no option but to stop working there.

In that meeting, we also asked them how they perceived the benefits of our work in the community. After some open discussions, the political leaders were still reluctant to move from their position.

In that meeting we asked the women NJC members and SHG leaders what they thought about the matter. A few women leaders who had spoken very little earlier said that we were needed in the community and that our volunteers and staff ought to be left alone. This shifted the entire mood of the meeting. Finally, it was decided that EDF, its staff and volunteers would not face any more pressure from the political party.

### **Learnings**

**Equity:** Ensuring equitable treatment in politically sensitive situations requires creating platforms where all involved can express their concerns without fear of bias.

**Transparency:** Transparent communication reduces misun-derstandings and builds credibility, especially in volatile situations. This openness helps clarify their position and intentions, building trust with community members.

By clearly stating commitment to neutrality and their intended response to ongoing pressure, the organization possibly prevented further suspicion or rumors.

**Inclusivity:** Inclusivity strengthens partnerships by ensuring all affected parties are involved in dialogue. Inclusivity is reflected in the organization's decision to meet not only with senior political leaders but also with local leaders, NJC members, and women's self-help groups. This approach helps the organization navigate local dynamics and secure support from various community segments, including influential local women's leaders who advocate for the organization's continued presence.

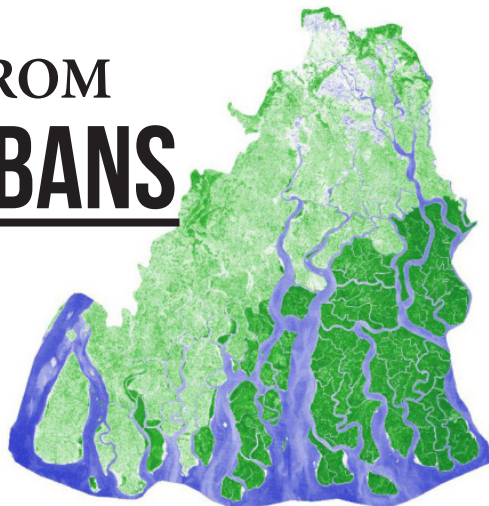
**Commitment:** The principle of commitment is particularly valuable in politically charged environments, where maintaining one's mission and values under pressure can stabilize partnerships. This case highlights how commitment can reinforce an organization's integrity and earn respect from the community.

**Cultural Sensitivity:** The organization's actions demonstrate a deep awareness of the local political landscape and cultural dynamics, where political alliances often influence community activities. Their decision to communicate openly and engage with local leaders reflects sensitivity to these dynamics and respect for the community's culture.

**Integrity & Courage:** In an environment where political bias is the norm, integrity sets the organization apart and builds long-term credibility. The commitment to honesty, even if it risks relationships with local authorities, illustrates the importance of integrity in partnership brokering.

**Mutual Benefit:** Focusing on mutual benefit can shift the perspective from immediate political gains to long-term community development. This approach encourages political leaders to see the value in a neutral organization that serves the community, fostering a healthier, more supportive partnership.

# STORIES FROM SUNDERBANS



## *Sunderbans' Song*

*Where rivers dance with tides untamed,  
Through mangrove veils and storms unnamed,  
The tiger's gaze, the fisher's plea,  
Life is bound to land and sea.  
Brackish waters, shifting ground,  
In shadowed creeks, lost voices sound.  
With honeyed toil and nets cast wide,  
They chase the moon, they fight the tide.*


*Monsoons carve their will on sand,  
As borders melt in drowning land.  
The boatman prays, the cyclone  
sways, The hungry wait for fairer days.  
Through rising seas and wealth unseen,  
The Sunderbans still stand serene.  
A whispered song, a battle cry,  
Rooted deep, yet reaching sky.*

*Anonymously collected*



## Every Voice Matters: Restoring Trust in a Fractured Women’s Group

Rina Naskar Mondal\*

 Rina Naskar Mondal, a 40-year-old woman with a Class XII education, is a dedicated member of a community-based women’s group and a former elected village council member in the Sundarbans, home to the world’s largest mangrove forests. She was part of the first cohort to participate in the Partnership Building training program.

Rina had mobilized a women’s group focused on economic entrepreneurship by producing agro-based products but she faced challenges in keeping the group together.

Equidiversity Foundation was supporting the group’s journey to independence by providing training and limited material resources, but this support wasn’t sufficient. Due to financial constraints, the group struggled to reach their desired level of production and profit, leading to frustration among members. As a result, some members began leaving the group. “Out of the 10 members, 5 had already left. As the group’s leader, I had come to accept this,” Rina reflected.

After attending a workshop, Rina took proactive steps. She called the remaining members together to discuss their issues openly. Through this conversation, she was able to address their concerns, which led to

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\* Reena has 8 years of community based experience being associated with community power centres in various capacities

some members returning. “The workshop taught me the importance of creating a space for everyone to share their thoughts. It’s essential to summarize and document the resolutions that emerge, make sure everyone has a chance to speak, and most importantly, to listen to each other,” she explained.


### **Learnings**

*Empowering Local Leaders: Rina’s story illustrates the power of empowering local leaders through training and capacity-building. By equipping her with skills in partnering principles, she was able to strongly advocate for her community.*

*Value of Dialogue and Listening: The experience taught Rina that creating a space for open dialogue is crucial for resolving conflicts and re-engaging members. Her experience shows how listening and summarizing resolutions can address grievances and rebuild trust within a team.*

## Practicing Partnership in Conflict: A Personal Account

Mandira Banerjee\*

y name is Mandira, and I've been working with Equidiversity Foundation since 2018. In the Sundarbans—the world's largest mangrove forest—I focus on empowering women socially, politically, and economically, and nurturing leadership among children and youth.

I was introduced to Partnership Brokering in 2022 and deepened my understanding through two more workshops in 2023 and 2024. Applying these principles gradually began to shift the way I approached my work.

Earlier, while working in a team, I believed that others had to agree with me. I avoided disagreement and often pushed my own opinions. When things didn't go my way, I would become agitated and upset.

Before one of our organization's annual programs, I had a disagreement with a colleague. Beyond being a teammate, he had been my mentor and guide—and still is. We've co-designed workshops, built training modules, and facilitated sessions together. We've also shared a close personal and professional rapport.

A day before our annual awareness program, a natural calamity forced us to postpone the event. My colleague made some immediate

\* *With 8 years of experience in community based practice Mandira as Team Leader of Equidiversity Foundation.*

decisions—especially concerning the field plans—without consulting me. I felt excluded, angry, and hurt. For the next 10–15 days, I avoided any real communication with him, limiting our interaction to essential whatsapp texts.

A month later, we had a consultation with the Child Rights Commission—a program conceptualized by him. Emotionally detached by then, I withdrew from my responsibilities. The result: poor coordination, limited outreach, and noticeable gaps in implementation. After the event, I started questioning what had gone wrong. Within a few days, I realized my unresolved emotions and lack of communication had directly affected the program's quality.

Even after this realization, I struggled to speak to him. My anger and hurt made me resistant to listening. This emotional distance began affecting our broader work dynamic. Eventually, I reflected deeper and asked myself: how could I be so resentful toward someone I also saw as a mentor?

Through a conversation with a senior, I recognized I had judged his actions without knowing his intent—treating him like an opponent instead of a teammate. Mustering the courage, I initiated a long-overdue conversation. He shared that his decisions were made to ease my burden, not exclude me. He, too, had felt hurt by my coldness.

That honest conversation helped us reconnect. We expressed our feelings openly, without filters. Though it was difficult to hear his perspective at first, taking time helped me understand where he was coming from. From that point on, our dialogue and collaboration started to revive—stronger and more respectful.

## **Learnings**

*Honest, transparent communication is essential in building and restoring trust in partnerships.*

*In partnerships, all partners are mutually accountable—not only for our own actions but also for how those actions affect shared goals.*

*Respectful listening allows for understanding beyond surface disagreements. It builds empathy, a critical foundation for sustainable partnerships. Regular reflection strengthens self-awareness—a key trait of effective partnership brokers who must navigate complexity with humility.*

*The practitioner's realization that she judged her mentor from a place of control reflects an internal imbalance of power. When she stepped back and engaged in equal dialogue, both partners re-entered the relationship with shared respect and authority. Effective partnerships require power to be shared, not held. Letting go of control can open up space for mutual growth.*

*Conflicts are inevitable in partnerships—but resolution lies in timely, courageous dialogue.*

*Trust is both fragile and resilient—it must be nurtured through consistent actions and revisited when strained.*

## Her Voice Matters: Centering Domestic Violence Survivors' Agency in Local Systems

Sonali Bajkhan Pradhan\*

I had gone to Dholahat Police Station in the Patharpratima Block regarding a case of domestic violence. The woman wanted to have a discussion with her husband at the police station, so I spoke with the police and arranged for them to sit together. The police summoned both the woman and her husband to the station.

However, the woman's husband arrived accompanied by a few political leaders. They questioned the authority of Nari Jagaran Committee, asking how we could permit a woman to leave her marital home or return to her parents. I calmly responded, *"It was her decision—we simply supported her choice."* I also clarified, *"The Nari Jagaran Committee works in coordination with the Gram Panchayat, and you're welcome to verify this with them."*

Later, when I returned to the area, I sensed that those political leaders had some concerns about our work. Therefore, I had an open discussion with one of them regarding how we handled domestic violence cases. In our area, it is common to resolve such issues through village arbitration. I shared my observation of these arbitrations with the political leader,

During these arbitrations, I've seen that while there is an attempt to guide the woman, the truth is—only she and her husband fully

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\* Sonali has 4 years of experience in community based practice. A member of Nari Jagaran Committee herself, she has been passionately navigating power imbalances at all levels from family to community and governance.

understand their situation. When too many people weigh in with judgments, it often results in undue pressure on the woman, dictating what she should or shouldn't do. This can leave her feeling isolated and hopeless, leading her to seek support from groups like the Nari Jagaran Committee. As local leaders, if we choose to truly listen to her and value her voice, it won't just support her—it will also strengthen your credibility and respect within the community.

The Partnership Training helped me see my work through a new lens. Earlier, I would share my opinions and move on, without truly listening to others or considering the long-term impact. For instance, during Gram Sabha meetings, we would present women's proposals, but I never thought about how they aligned with the Gram Panchayat's broader priorities. I would simply attend, listen, and leave.

After the training, I understood that the Panchayat has its own goals, responsibilities, and a role in community development. It wasn't just about relaying what women wanted—it was about showing why these issues mattered for governance.

With this perspective, during a Gram Sabha, I suggested to the Panchayat head, "If we want a women-friendly Panchayat, we should maintain a register for domestic violence cases and ensure elected members follow up monthly." The Panchayat head agreed and committed to doing so with support from EquiDiversity Foundation. On the same day, three new cases were reported—proving that when governance system listens, people speak up.

### **Key Learnings for Systems Change Thinking**

**Respect for Local Governance Structures:** Instead of working in isolation, the Nari Jagaran Committee aligned its efforts with the Gram Panchayat—an existing local governance body—ensuring institutional backing and long term sustainability of the intervention.

**Shifting Mindsets & Power Dynamics:** The conversation with political leaders challenges traditional norms where external figures decide a woman's fate, instead advocating for her autonomy and decision-making power. By encouraging empathy where elected leaders to listen and understand women's perspectives, the approach subtly shifts power dynamics in favour of marginalized voices.

**Institutionalizing Change Through Policy and Practice:** The recommendation to document domestic violence cases and conduct follow-ups integrates a systematic response mechanism within the Gram Panchayat. Instead of addressing cases in isolation, this shift ensures consistent monitoring, accountability, and institutional commitment to supporting survivors.

**Strengthening Community-Based Support Systems:** Recognizing that village arbitrations often reinforce societal pressure on women, the intervention advocates for more empathetic, survivor-centric support structures. By involving the EquiDiversity Foundation, the approach ensures that survivors have access to specialized resources beyond traditional dispute resolution methods.

## Transforming Authority into Allyship: A Political Leader's Commitment to Collective Action

Maheswar Naiya\*

**A**s a political leader and an active member of a political party, establishing and maintaining communication with various stakeholders is of utmost importance to me. In my region, I work closely with different entities such as the Panchayat, police stations, Block Development Officer (BDO), schools, local clubs, Members of the Legislative Assembly (MLA), Members of Parliament (MP), and other influential figures. Understanding their challenges and needs allows me to take the necessary steps to address them effectively. Therefore, when making decisions, I find it crucial to understand them through the lens of partnership principles.

I have participated in two partnership training programs, where I gained insights into different principles of partnership. The two principles that have had the most profound impact on me are 'openness', which promotes transparent discussions where everyone can participate, and 'shared risk and benefit', which emphasizes moving towards a goal collectively while sharing both the rewards and challenges.

We have been working on several government initiatives, particularly focused on preventing child marriage and human trafficking. Various

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NGOs have been actively engaged in these issues for a long time, but there was a need to align their efforts with the government and administrative bodies. To facilitate this, I organized a meeting that included the Circle Inspector (CI), MLA, Panchayat Samiti members, local clubs, Anganwadi workers, police, BDO, and other key stakeholders.

The issue of increasing child marriages and subsequent human trafficking has become a serious concern in our region. Every stakeholder present in the meeting had a crucial role to play in addressing this crisis. My primary role was to moderate the discussion, ensuring that every member could voice their concerns, share their perspectives, and determine how much they could contribute. Although different members had varying opinions, I aimed to establish a shared goal that everyone could work towards.

Tackling child marriage and human trafficking cannot be done single-handedly by any one entity. A collective approach is necessary, where all stakeholders agree on a unified goal and work together strategically. I also focused on ensuring that coordination was maintained so that every participant could listen to and understand each other's perspectives.

One of my biggest takeaways from the partnership training was the importance of active listening and mutual exchange of ideas, ensuring that every perspective—whether beneficial or challenging—is considered. When conflicts or challenges arise, I make it a point to listen to all parties involved before arriving at a well-rounded decision. In the past, I would sometimes impose my decisions without thorough consultation, even using pressure tactics when needed, but I have since shifted towards a more inclusive and consensus-driven approach. This has not only improved my effectiveness but has also made it easier to gain the trust and cooperation of all stakeholders.

Recently, a case of elopement came to my attention, where the families of the individuals involved approached me seeking a resolution. The young boy and girl who had eloped were brought back, and their families were also present for the discussion. I took this opportunity to explain to both parties the negative consequences of early marriage—

both from a social and legal standpoint. I also emphasized the legal repercussions that could arise from such actions.


During the discussion, I facilitated a dialogue between both families to resolve their disputes amicably. Eventually, I was able to convince them to send the boy and girl back to their respective homes, ensuring that no immediate harm or distress would arise. Additionally, I reassured them that if any further issues occurred, they could reach out to me for assistance.

In previous situations, I often found that if I sided too much with one party, it would cause resentment in the other. However, by applying partnership principles, I now ensure a balanced approach by listening to all sides, synthesizing different perspectives, and making informed decisions. This eliminates biases and promotes fair decision-making, strengthening relationships with the community and improving the overall impact of my leadership.

By adopting a partnership-oriented approach, I have been able to make more effective, inclusive, and sustainable decisions that benefit the entire community.

## Letting Go to Grow: From Control to Collective Leadership

Tapasi Mondal\*

y name is Tapasi Mondal, and I am associated with three organizations—‘Ebong Alap,’ ‘Piyali’s Boi Ghor,’ and ‘Equiversity Foundation.’ My work focuses on engaging with youth and mothers.

Initially, I took on a leadership role where I was responsible for managing everything. While this gave me a sense of importance, it also created significant pressure since I was handling everything alone. However, after participating in a partnership training program, I gained a deeper understanding of shared leadership and collaboration.

Following this, I organized a program with the youth. Instead of making all the decisions myself, I discussed the program details with them and emphasized that we would plan it together and distribute responsibilities among everyone. The planning process was fully participatory—everyone contributed ideas, and tasks were divided collectively.

Previously, the youth would attend the group sessions and listen to me, but I rarely saw enthusiasm from them. However, this time, when

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*\*The writer has more than 23 years of experience as a Community Based Practitioner.*

I stepped back from the leadership role, they took ownership, started seeing themselves as an integral part of the team, and felt a sense of responsibility. As a result, the program was successfully completed on time.

Through this experience, I learned that by gradually letting go of control, I could create space for others to step into leadership roles and participate equally. This reduced my workload, eased my stress, and made our collective efforts more efficient and meaningful. What was once solely my responsibility became a shared effort, making the process smoother and more inclusive.

Some boys in our community faced social scrutiny because they did not conform to traditional expectations—people questioned why they chose dance over football or cricket. Initially, a few of these boys joined our group but lacked enthusiasm, as they did not see any material benefit and felt hesitant due to societal conditioning.

To address this, we engaged in discussions with them, emphasizing that this group belonged to them just as much as it did to us. We highlighted how their participation in various programs could help them build their identity while also advocating for their right to express themselves as they truly are.

Over time, as they actively participated in different events and school programs with us, they gained social recognition and even helped shift people's perspectives. Today, they are no longer questioned about their choices, and instead, they feel a strong sense of belonging within the group. Their participation is now self-driven because they know they are valued members of this collective.

By fostering collaboration, shared responsibility, and inclusivity, we have created a space where everyone—regardless of societal labels—can thrive, lead, and contribute meaningfully.

### ***Learnings***

*Letting go of control empowered others to step up, making our work more sustainable and collaborative. Additionally, by creating an inclusive environment where non-conforming boys could participate without judgment, we challenged social norms and fostered a deeper sense of belonging. Their growing confidence and recognition within the community reflected how collective ownership and mutual respect can transform both individuals and the spaces we inhabit. In essence, leadership grounded in partnership leads to shared growth, greater resilience, and stronger community bonds.*

## CONCLUSION

The stories shared in this book highlight how the partnering framework and principles were applied in community engagement. Across diverse contexts, a few core themes emerged as essential for fostering sustainable collaboration and driving meaningful change in the West Bengal context.

**Building Trust and Mutual Respect:** Trust is the foundation of any successful partnership. Whether working with local governance structures, community members, or political leaders, building relationships based on mutual respect fosters openness, engagement, and long-term commitment. By recognizing stakeholders' concerns, valuing their perspectives, and maintaining transparency, facilitators and organizations can create an environment where collaboration thrives.

**Transparent and Inclusive Communication:** Clear, honest, and empathetic communication strengthens partnerships by ensuring that all parties understand shared goals and expectations. Whether addressing political sensitivities, engaging with skeptical stakeholders, or responding to community concerns, open dialogue fosters trust, reduces misunderstandings, and enhances problem-solving efforts.

**Empowering Stakeholders and Encouraging Ownership:** Partnerships succeed when stakeholders feel a sense of ownership and agency. By shifting from externally driven interventions to co-created solutions, these stories demonstrate the power of empowering local

leaders, community members, and decision-makers. When individuals and institutions take responsibility for solutions, sustainability is enhanced, and long-term impact is ensured.

**Adaptability and Context Sensitivity:** Effective partnerships require flexibility and a deep understanding of cultural, political, and socio-economic contexts. Recognizing stakeholders' realities and tailoring strategies accordingly enables facilitators to navigate challenges, address systemic barriers, and create inclusive solutions that resonate with diverse communities.

**Commitment to Learning and Reflection:** Sustainable partnerships require continuous learning, reflection, and adaptation. Facilitators, leaders, and organizations must remain open to feedback, refine their approaches, and embrace iterative processes to address evolving community needs effectively.

**Equity and Systems Change Thinking:** Many stories emphasize the importance of addressing root causes rather than just symptoms. Equity-driven partnerships challenge traditional power dynamics, integrate marginalized voices, and institutionalize change within existing structures. By embedding solutions within governance frameworks and advocating for policy shifts, partnerships become a vehicle for systemic transformation.

**Sustainability Through Mutual Benefit:** The most impactful partnerships are those where all stakeholders see tangible benefits. Whether through co-investment, shared learning, or collective problem-solving, ensuring mutual value strengthens commitment and enhances long-term collaboration.

Overall, these stories illustrate that effective partnership brokering is not just about facilitating collaboration but about fostering relationships, shifting power dynamics, and building systems that support sustainable change. By embracing these principles, organizations and community leaders can work together to create resilient, inclusive, and impactful partnerships that drive long-term social transformation.

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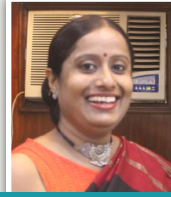
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