TAKING THE WORK FORWARD:

STRESS MANAGEMENT AND SELF-CARE OF SRHR ACTIVISTS AND HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS

TARSHI

NAZARIYA
FOUNDATION

THE JOURNEY BEGINS:

CONSULTATIONS WITH SRHR ACTIVISTS AND HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS ON THEIR STRESS MANAGEMENT AND BURNOUT PREVENTION NEEDS

2018-19: **TARSHI** and **Nazariya** collaborated to conduct a series of workshops to assess the **stress management and burnout prevention** needs of SRHR activists and human rights defenders.

52 ORGANISATIONS
20 STATES
60 PARTICIPANTS

Workshops were held in
- New Delhi
- Guwahati
- Hyderabad.

OUTCOMES

Awareness of the importance of self-care and burnout prevention among activists and organisations

Participants' identification of causes of stress in personal and professional lives, and possible ways to manage these

Spaces for dialogue and discussion on self-care

The role of unique stressors in individuals' lives: while some aspects of stress are familiar and shared across communities and contexts, there are crucial differences and complexities that emerge from differences in socio-cultural and political environments

Practical tips and tools for stress management and self-care that are economical and self-sustaining
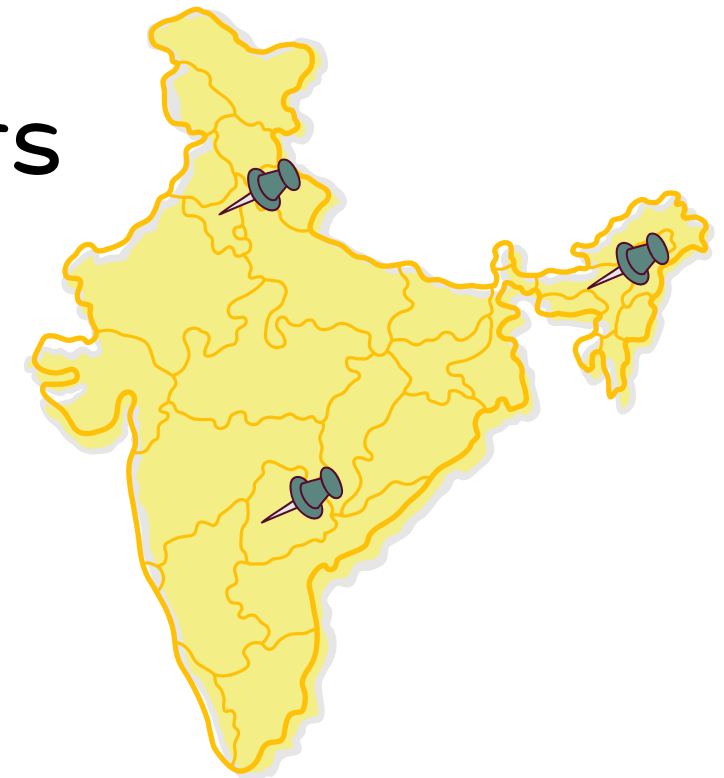
Crucial documentation on the self-care needs of those working on LGBT*QIA+ issues, sex work, gender-based violence and/or SRHR

WHY DiD WE DO THE NEED ASSESSMENT?

- Evidence points to how **mental health and wellbeing impact and are impacted by micro and macro environments**

- **Conversations on stress and burnout take a back seat** with activists and case workers who might also belong to marginalised communities, including but not limited to gender, sexuality, caste, religion, marital status, etc.

- **Human rights activists and defenders are vulnerable** (exposure to trauma, distressing situations and complex challenges) and often face a paradox that people committed to the wellbeing of others often **fail to commit to their own wellbeing.**

As organisations working on issues of sexuality, SRHR and queer communities, TARSHI and Nazariya felt a pressing need to acknowledge the presence and the impact of stress and burnout in the lives of SRHR activists and human rights defenders.

"People don't think that there can be a different way of looking at things. I feel that when it comes to our sexuality, the main thing that we are fighting for is the right to love. But we discuss everything except that. While we fight for these rights, our relationships don't survive because we are not talking about how to manage relationships in queer spaces."

"We can't say 'No'. This is the reason for our burnout. Say there is a person who is on the verge of committing suicide. Counselling is needed, but one is already feeling tired and almost burned out. I can't refrain from giving counselling because I'm already burnt out. I have to - have to - do it."

"My stressor is not my client, my stresses are all from dealing with the system and with other people. Frankly speaking, before this workshop, the only thing I did for stress relief was maybe a little shopping. Now I do the little exercises we learnt at the workshop. I take small breaks, I talk to my colleagues, and I feel better with these small things. I think it should be compulsory for organisations to have a policy for the mental health and wellbeing of their own counsellors and mental health workers. Before these workshops, I would never take leave, I would let my leaves lapse. Now I ask for holidays, breaks and leaves."

LOOKING BACK TO LOOK AHEAD: INTEGRATING WELLBEING IN GENDER AND SEXUALITY WORK

To take our needs assessment work forward, we reconnected with participants from earlier workshops to organise a two-day session, where we explored where we were at, and brainstormed on possibilities for the way ahead. We followed this up with an event bringing together human rights activists, funders, NGOs and collectives to discuss how we can sustainably take forward work on gender and sexuality while accounting for the wellbeing of the people doing the work.

The questions we explored:

1 What has been the experience of organisations implementing self-care and collective care at the workplace?

2 How can self-care and collective care at the organisational level be contextual and relevant - to our geographies, our communities, and our specific needs?

3 What do organisations need to do to integrate and sustain self-care and collective care in the way they work? How can funders support this?

In the following pages, we attempt to offer a coherent understanding of some of the complex concepts and ideas expressed across **three panels** and discussions with participants at this event.

They may be treated as **cues for follow-up reflection, planning** and some **implementation** of what may be immediately possible - as options of **possibilities** to explore, going forward.

As people and organisations working on gender and sexuality issues, we know that we have unique factors that cause us stress (and potentially burnout) in our personal and professional lives.

Nazariya and TARSHI worked with a range of case workers and human rights activists to map these unique stressors and explore tools to manage or prevent stress and burnout at the individual and organisational levels. We have also been developing resources to facilitate spaces for dialogue, planning, and implementation of self-care and collective care programs in organisations, collectives, and networks.

PANEL 1

LOOKING BACK AT THE EXPERIENCES AND IMPACT OF PRACTISING SELF AND COLLECTIVE CARE, WE RECEIVE PROOF OF CONCEPT AND ANECDOTAL EVIDENCE OF IMPLEMENTING SUSTAINABLE AND GROWING CHANGE:

In this panel, TARSHI and Nazariya sent the context to our collaboration on these topics, and participants of our needs assessment shared their learnings from our needs assessment workshops, and their experiences implementing self-care and collective care strategies at the workplace.

PANEL 1

Bandana Sharma,
Akanksha Seva Sadan

Oinam Hemba,
Empowering Trans Ability

Rituparna Borah,
Nazariya

Ramya Anand,
TARSHI

Even as discussions grow on the importance of self-care and collective care in human rights work, they continue to have neoliberal and Western connotations that are often out-of-place in diverse cultural contexts. Additionally, concepts and activities may not account for the diversity we bring – in terms of gender identities, livelihoods, caste and class locations, disability status, education levels, and more.

Seeing self-care and collective care purely through therapy or one-off workshops ignores contextual, localised requirements appropriate for the people in question.

PANEL 2   ON THE THEME OF MAKING SELF-CARE AND COLLECTIVE CARE RELATABLE TO OUR CONTEXTS.

What are alternative, inclusive approaches to implementing self-care and collective care? Why do we need them? What questions do we have as we try to build these spaces?

PANEL 2

Anindya Hajra,
Pratyay Gender Trust

Arshiya Kochar,
One Future Collective

Bharat Setu,
Vishakha

Nidhi Goyal,
Rising Flame

Sonal Giani,
IPPF

SELF-CARE MEANS RESPONSE

CREATION OF INTERDEPENDENCE IS CRITICAL TO COLLECTIVE CARE

CURRENT DEFINITION OF SELF-CARE IS NEUROTYPICAL

STRESS MANAGEMENT AND BURNOUT PREVENTION

LOOKING BACK TO LOOK AHEAD

BHARAT

ARSHIYA
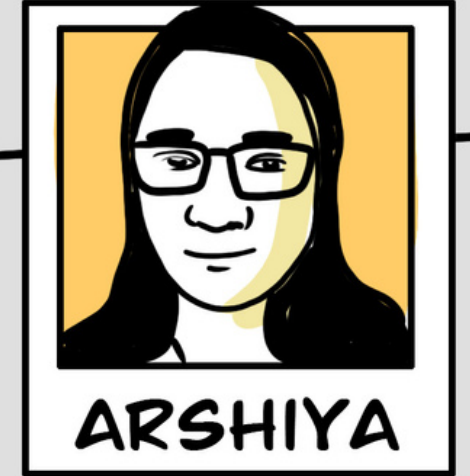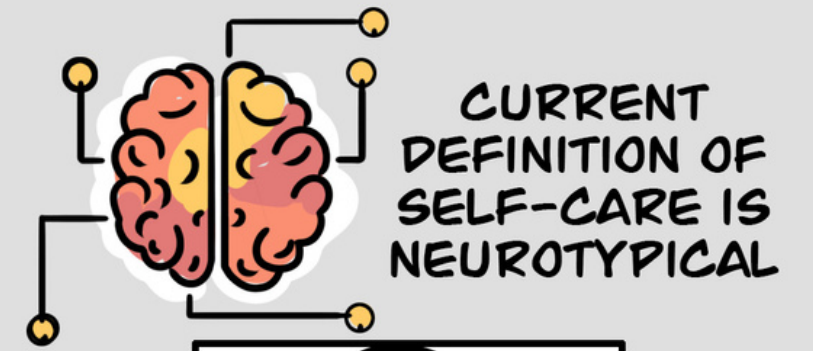
SELF SPACE IS LIKE GETTING INTO A DIALOGUE WITH SELF BUT WITH PEACE

HEALING SPACES LIKE EXPRESSING ANGER IS IMPERATIVE TO OUR SELF CARE

ARE WE WILLING TO LET OTHERS SHOW UP FOR US, IN ADDITION TO JUST SHOWING UP FOR OURSELVES?

ARE OUR SELF-CARE NEEDS TAKEN CARE OF IN OUR BUDGETS?

CHECK-INS BEFORE SESSIONS ARE A GOOD START

WE BELIEVE

SELF-CARE AND COLLECTIVE CARE ARE COMPLIMENTARY AND ARE NOT MUTUALLY EXCLUSIVE

HOW ARE WE ACCOUNTABLE FOR LEADERS' CARE?

PANEL 2

Anindya Hajra,
Pratyay Gender Trust

Arshiya Kochar,
One Future Collective

Bharat Setu,
Vishakha

Nidhi Goyal,
Rising Flame

Sonal Giani,
IPPF
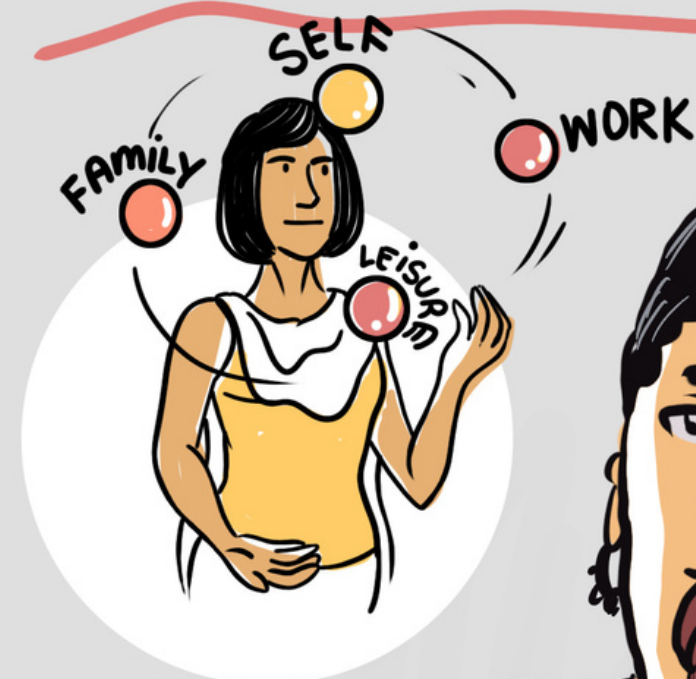
The funding ecosystem is intricately tied to the wellbeing of individuals and organisations working on gender and sexuality issues.
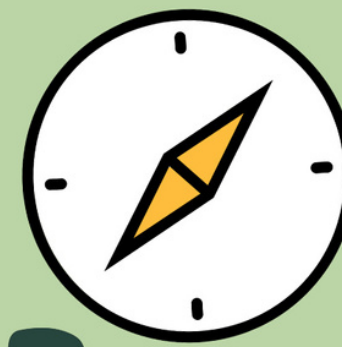
PANEL 3

HOW CAN WE SUSTAiN WELLBEiNG STRATEGiES iN GENDER AND SEXUALiTY WORK?

While funding organisations can support and further institutionalise self-care and collective care in their grantee partners' workplaces, they may have to navigate stressors of their own in an environment that is often fraught for organisations funding work on gender and sexuality.

What stressors do funding organisations – and individuals working within – face in their engagement with grantee partners and at the macro/environmental level in which they work? What are contextual, sustainable ways in which funding organisations can contribute to institutionalising wellbeing among those working on gender and sexuality issues?

PANEL 3

Anuradha Rajan,
SAWF IN

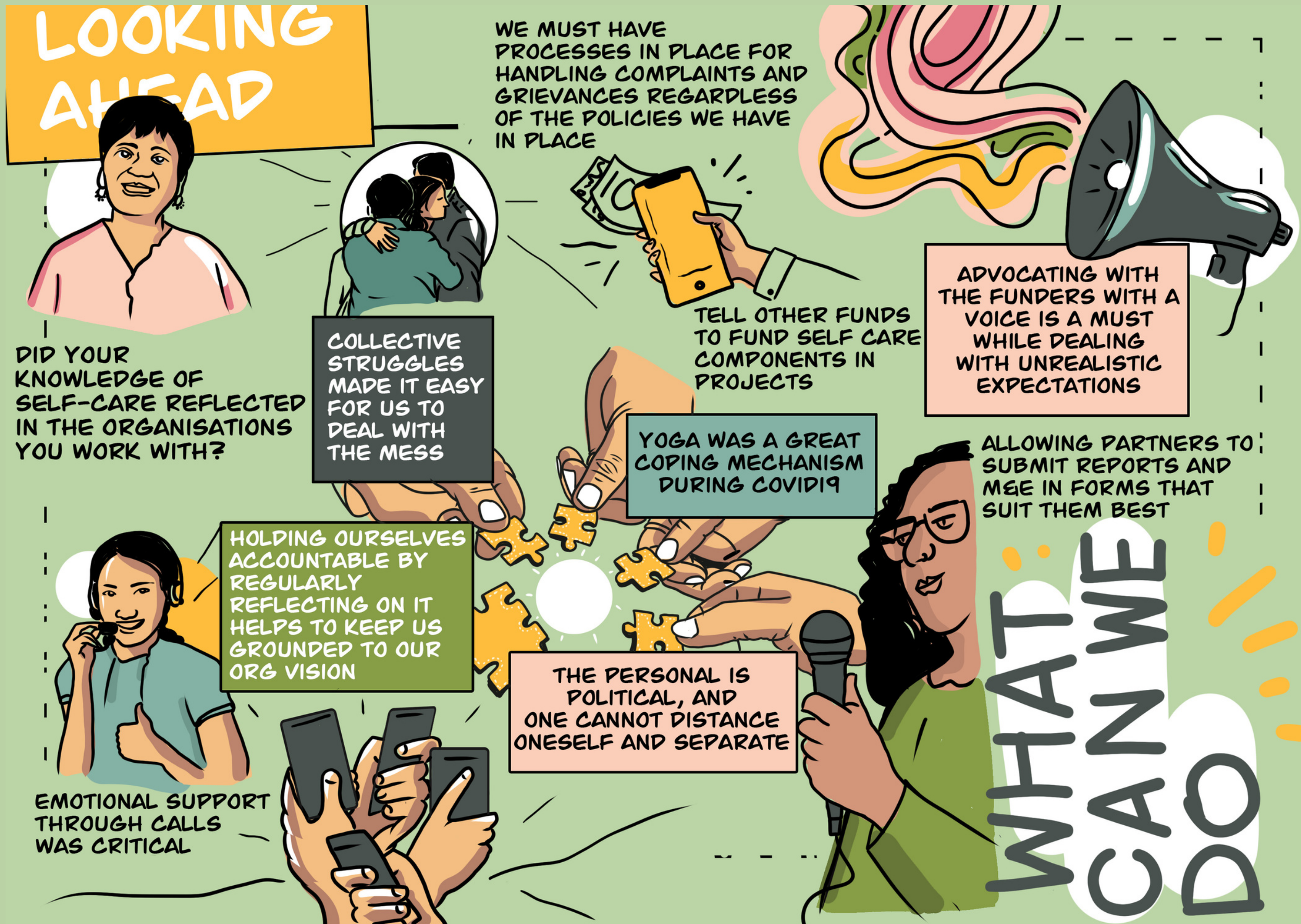Praneeta S. Kapur,
AJWS

Raj Mariwala,
Mariwala Health Initiative

Ratnaboli Ray,
Anjali

LOOKING AHEAD

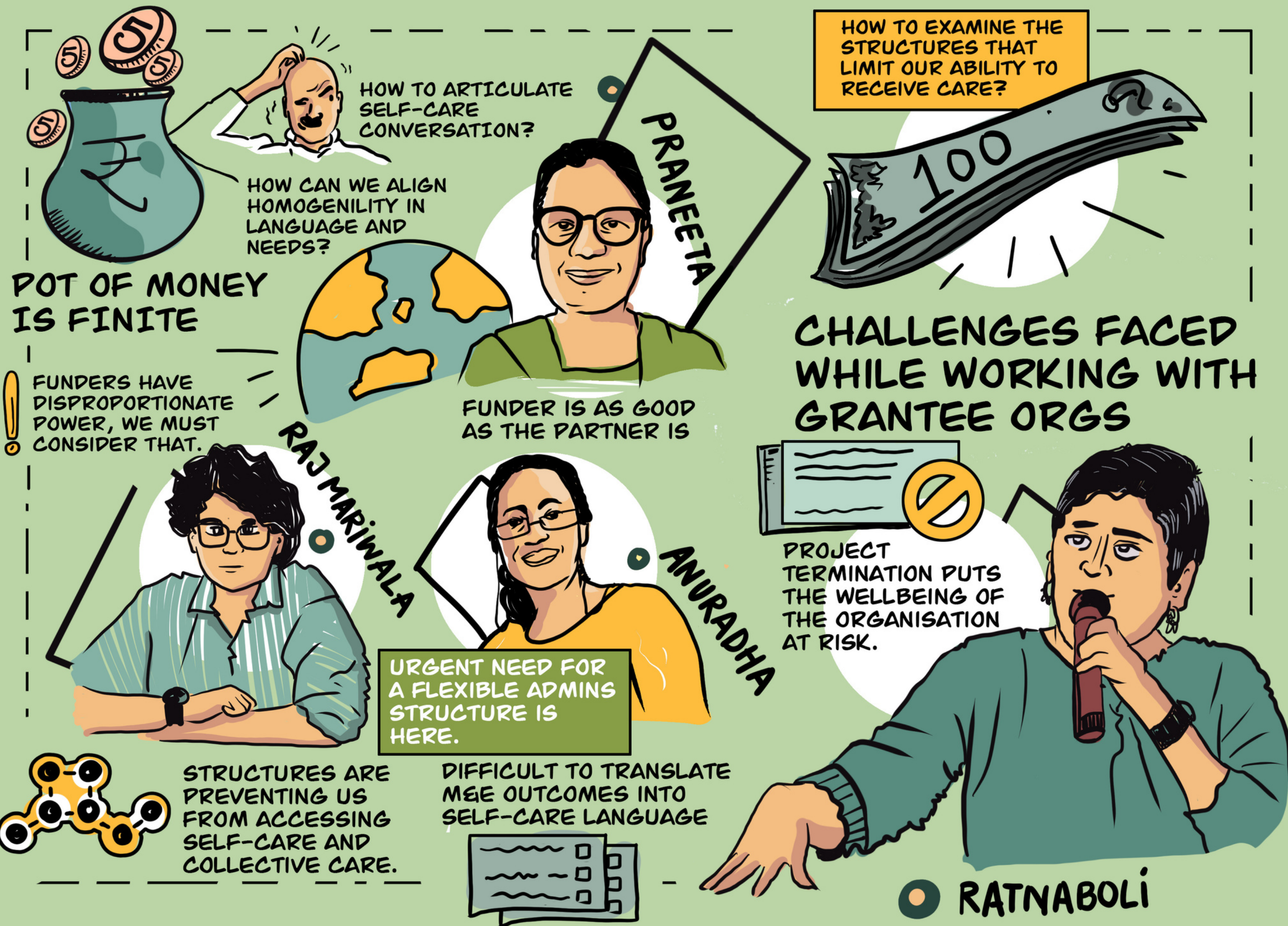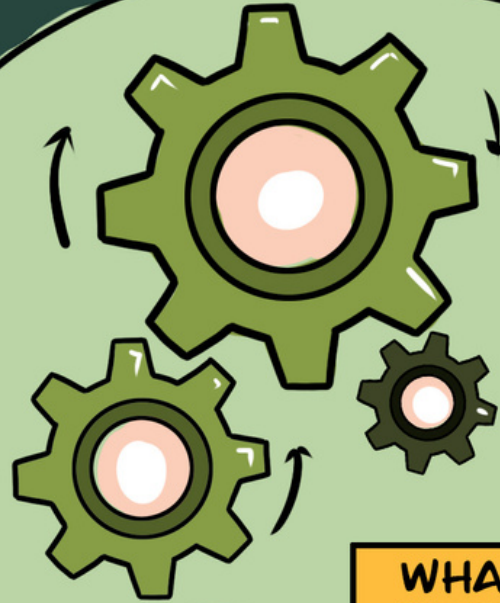WE MUST HAVE PROCESSES IN PLACE FOR HANDLING COMPLAINTS AND GRIEVANCES REGARDLESS OF THE POLICIES WE HAVE IN PLACE

DID YOUR KNOWLEDGE OF SELF-CARE REFLECTED IN THE ORGANISATIONS YOU WORK WITH?

COLLECTIVE STRUGGLES MADE IT EASY FOR US TO DEAL WITH THE MESS

TELL OTHER FUNDS TO FUND SELF CARE COMPONENTS IN PROJECTS

ADVOCATING WITH THE FUNDERS WITH A VOICE IS A MUST WHILE DEALING WITH UNREALISTIC EXPECTATIONS

YOGA WAS A GREAT COPING MECHANISM DURING COVID19

ALLOWING PARTNERS TO SUBMIT REPORTS AND M&E IN FORMS THAT SUIT THEM BEST

HOLDING OURSELVES ACCOUNTABLE BY REGULARLY REFLECTING ON IT HELPS TO KEEP US GROUNDED TO OUR ORG VISION

THE PERSONAL IS POLITICAL, AND ONE CANNOT DISTANCE ONESELF AND SEPARATE

EMOTIONAL SUPPORT THROUGH CALLS WAS CRITICAL

WHAT CAN WE DO

POT OF MONEY IS FINITE

HOW TO ARTICULATE SELF-CARE CONVERSATION?

HOW CAN WE ALIGN HOMOGENILITY IN LANGUAGE AND NEEDS?

PRANEETA

HOW TO EXAMINE THE STRUCTURES THAT LIMIT OUR ABILITY TO RECEIVE CARE?

100

FUNDERS HAVE DISPROPORTIONATE POWER, WE MUST CONSIDER THAT.

FUNDER IS AS GOOD AS THE PARTNER IS

CHALLENGES FACED WHILE WORKING WITH GRANTEE ORGS

PANEL 3

Anuradha Rajan, SAWF IN

Praneeta S. Kapur, AJWS

Raj Mariwala, Mariwala Health Initiative

Ratnaboli Ray, Anjali

RAJ MARIWALA

ANURADHA

PROJECT TERMINATION PUTS THE WELLBEING OF THE ORGANISATION AT RISK.

URGENT NEED FOR A FLEXIBLE ADMINS STRUCTURE IS HERE.

STRUCTURES ARE PREVENTING US FROM ACCESSING SELF-CARE AND COLLECTIVE CARE.

DIFFICULT TO TRANSLATE M&E OUTCOMES INTO SELF-CARE LANGUAGE
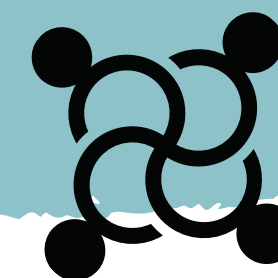
RATNABOLI

There is a **shift in the understanding** of self-care
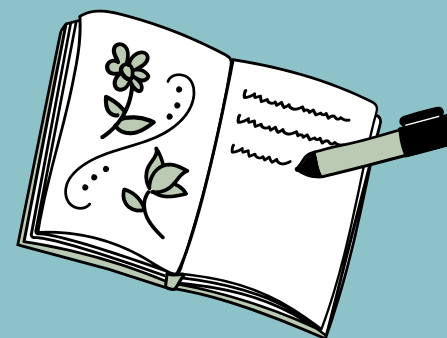
There is a slow but growing base of anecdotal evidence from the field pointing to an evolving acknowledgement that care is integral to sustaining human rights workers, and therefore, rights-based work.

Self and collective care are inseparable. Moreover, these concepts are rooted in the wider ecosystem at multiple points that are still being understood.

A crucial aspect of the way forward involves coming together with funders and philanthropists for open conversations and experience sharing - to create a paradigm shift in perspective that goes beyond a handful of people.

SUMMARY

This growing base of evidence translates into building in flexibility and potential for self and collective care components into programs and policies on the ground.

Flexibility is key because self-care and collective care cannot be institutionalised in traditional ways; this would be counterproductive.

It becomes equally important to explore the challenges funders are facing, and to ask this question and respond to it together.
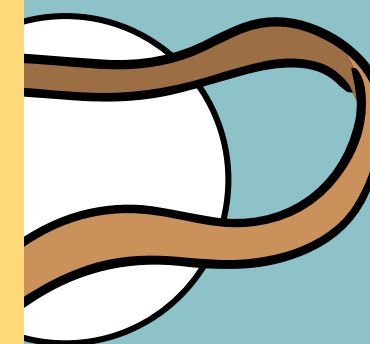
Individuals, organisations and contexts are heterogeneous. This diversity requires us to re-think familiar approaches to measuring and understanding performance and impact.
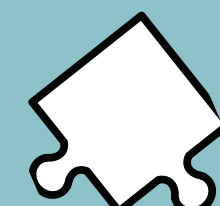
Our work through these conversations highlights the importance of maintaining individual and collective wellbeing to sustain our work and movements on gender and sexuality issues. We hope that this work contributes to creating a culture of care in our organisations, our work, and our movements and contributes to making them kinder, more empathetic, and sustained in the long run.

ABOUT THE ORGANISERS

TARSHI's work, guided by a sex-positive, non-heteronormative, pleasure-affirming perspective, has always emphasised self-care and wellbeing, and focused on burnout prevention. Learn more at **tarshi.net**

Nazariya's focused work on mental health with queer communities, has led to a steadily evolving exploration and understanding of stress management and self-care. Read about Nazariya's work at **thenazariyafoundation.org**

CREDITS

Visual notes designed by:
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Thanks to staff members from TARSHI and Nazariya for their work on this document, especially Nandhini Jaishankar, Ramya Anand, Rituparna Borah, and Shikha Aleya

RESOURCES BY TARSHI & NAZARIYA

- **Needs Assessment Report**

- **Guidance Note for Organisational Intervention**

- **Video Series- Me, We, Us**

- **Sustaining stress management and burnout in organisations**

- **Toolkit for organisations on stress management and burnout prevention**

This document summarises the efforts of **Nazariya Foundation** and **TARSHI** since 2017 in working with Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR) activists and human rights defenders on their stress management and burnout prevention needs.