



**Institute for  
Women's  
Empowerment**

*Reclaiming the "I", redefining the "WE"*

## **Well-being, Self-Care and Integrated Security (WeSIS) : An introduction**

The term Well-being, Self-Care and Integrated Security (WeSIS) was coined by the Institute for Women's Empowerment (IWE) and is regarded by IWE as a fundamental practice for building sustainable, transformative feminist leadership.

The concept of WeSIS has been developed out of a need; a need to refocus, re-energise and re-define activism and leadership so individuals do not compromise their own wellbeing to achieve organisational goals. As a practice, WeSIS aims to strengthen the foundations of social movements through nurturing the individuals who form the basis of these movements. WeSIS strives to provide a holistic approach to activism, which nurtures collectivism and solidarity as the foundations of movements while at the same time, caring for the health and wellbeing of the individuals within those movements. The practice of WeSIS helps activists challenge patriarchal structures which have been internalised into movements, organisations and individuals.

Oppressive power structures such as patriarchy and mandated gender roles are internalised not only by those who benefit from power, but also by those who are marginalised and oppressed. Internalised gender norms define our concept of self and how we understand the role of women through our relationships with those around us. In most societies this results in women not only being assigned caregiver roles, but that they must prioritise this role above all else, including their own self-care and wellbeing. It is through first recognising these internalised gender mandates that we can relinquish feelings of guilt and selfishness which are tied to our own and others' expectations of women. We are then equipped to understand where these gender mandates originate – are they cultural, religious, a product of class inequality and so on. Releasing ourselves from these feelings of inadequacy also builds self-esteem and encourages us to express and prioritise our own needs, while we remain sensitive and open to the needs of others around us.

Feminist activists are not exempt from this phenomenon as even women and men who recognise and resist oppressive structures have been socialised to accept many forms of less-visible disempowerment which prevent them from challenging the status quo. Gender is inculcated into our lives not only by society and our interactions with other individuals, institutions and culture, but through our personal dialogue with ourselves. We impose limitations and standards on ourselves without questioning how mandated gender roles influence this mentality. The concept and practice of WeSIS encourages individuals to deconstruct these internalised gender mandates, building a critical awareness of their own attitudes and how this affects their wellbeing.

Building internal strength and resilience or nurturing our internal wellbeing has been a critical component missing from our approaches to activism. Feminist activists often neglect their own health and wellbeing in their constant fight for equity and justice. Many individuals who are regarded as extraordinary leaders and have accomplished great victories in their work for social

justice have suffered enormous costs to their own wellbeing. This in turn has led to personal burnout, and stagnation and fragmentation in the movements. However, a social movement is only as strong as the individuals who comprise the greater collective. If these individuals are burnt out, unable to recognise their physical and emotional limits or devote their lives to a movement without taking stock of their personal wellbeing, then the movement is likely to be unsustainable as the activists are working in a finite capacity. Wellbeing, Self-Care and Integrated Security concepts and practise guide individual activists and human rights defenders in building their internal strength so they avoid burnout and damage to their health and wellbeing.

A holistic understanding of "security" takes into consideration the internal as well as the external threats that feminists have to confront, on a daily basis, and at multiple levels in their lives and in the course of their work. While much "technical" and "logistical" strategies have been developed and rolled out, necessary in the situations where activists and their families face physical and life-threatening situations daily, it is imperative to approach security issues as also having "internal causes and effects". These internal elements may affect an individual's (and consequently her collective's) safety if not brought into the calculation of the risk factors, and in the assessment of the personal and group vulnerabilities that affect the real level of risk involved in any specific situation. Ultimately, the same process of "internal work" is necessary to build the emotional, spiritual and mental strength to resist and hopefully, transform the oppressive patriarchal institutions and relationships that continue unabated to limit, obstruct and punish women, especially those who visibly and actively confront them.

Reflexivity is central to the concept and practice of WeSIS, therefore it is necessary to create safe and inductive spaces where women can reflect and express their experiences, feelings, aspirations and thoughts. For women who, whether consciously or unconsciously, regard their primary role as caring for others' needs, this can be a profound step in realising the value of their own individual and personal opinions and feelings and developing their self-esteem in vocally expressing their thoughts to others without fear of reprisal or being judged, shamed or rejected. Such 'safe spaces', based on respect and acceptance of each person's lived experiences, encourage women to practice reflexivity and to share often deeply personal feelings and experiences with one another, and in the process, recognise the fundamental commonalities in the "women's situation" that is the basis of solidarity.

It also has significance for the nurturing of 'feminist, transformative and sustainable leadership'. Through promoting wellbeing and self-care of individuals in the context of their organised activism, WeSIS cultivates the capacities essential for feminist leadership which is transformative and sustainable. Internal strength, resilience and mindfulness are all critical attributes for women to carry out sustainable and meaningful work towards transforming oppressive social relations to being equitable and just.. The process of self-transformation has often been neglected in collective activism as activists become engrossed by meeting deadlines and achieving goals, however, this process is an essential element for achieving social transformation. Through nurturing strong, resilient activists who are mindful and self-aware we build the self-esteem and confidence for women to realise their value and potential as leaders, undermining the patriarchal culture which works against us.

The value of this internal work cannot be underestimated, as our wellbeing is at the core of

every action and interaction we undertake. Through realising our self-worth, reclaiming our conceptualisation of ourselves and our identities and recognising our value and potential as leaders, we empower ourselves. Well-being is about internal strength and resilience, by nurturing these internal attributes we create stronger foundations for the networks, organisations, communities and collectives that we are party to. And we build the power and resilience we need to sustain ourselves as feminist, transformative leaders.