

**FROM MARGINS TO AGENCY: AN ETHNOGRAPHIC
STUDY ON WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT UNIT AT KFI
RAJGHAT EDUCATION CENTRE**

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines learning as a process beyond formal educational spaces through an ethnographic study of the Unit for Women's Empowerment (UWE) at Rajghat Education Centre (REC), Krishnamurti Foundation India (KFI), Varanasi. Drawing upon Jiddu Krishnamurti's philosophy on education, which emphasizes self-awareness, freedom from conditioning, and community engagement, the study explores how learning unfolds outside classrooms through obtaining skills and livelihood generation enabling rural women to exercise agency. Based on qualitative fieldwork involving interviews and participant observation, the paper argues that UWE acts as a space for social interaction between the REC community and the rural women from the surrounding villages in order to foster a vision for women's empowerment through encouraging individual agency while continuously negotiating patriarchal constraints within the familial domain.

KEYWORDS: Education, Women's Empowerment, Lifelong Learning, Skill Development, Livelihood, Individual Agency, Social Interaction, Familial Domain

INTRODUCTION

Education serves the purpose to free individuals from fear, end their sufferings, and challenge the status quo which is entrenched in social divisions based on caste, class, gender, religion, and nationality (Krishnamurti, 1953). Dominant ideas of education valorize the sphere of classroom learning and teacher-student interaction for building connections through learning process. The concept of education is not limited to education given at school but transcends beyond formal spaces (Arslan et al., 2024). This paper focuses on Jiddu Krishnamurti's

philosophy on education which moves beyond formal spaces and connects to the society at large through building connections and envisioning empowerment.

Meena and Rekha are sisters and members at the Unit for Women's Empowerment (UWE). For them it's a place for learning, skilling, working, and earning. Here they acquire new skills in tailoring. They have learnt to make stationary pouches, handbags, laptop bags, and tiffin bags. Staying from morning till evening UWE acts as a space for not just learning and working but sharing conversations and laughter. When I visited their home I saw attractive sofa-covers in pink colour which Rekha had stitched after learning tailoring skills from UWE. During interviews they shared that apart from gaining new skills and working at UWE they also aspire to stitch clothes for the village people to make some extra income.

As one of the units of the Rural Centre at Rajghat Education Centre (REC), Krishnamurti Foundation India (KFI); UWE imparts skill based learning to its members. Learning at UWE is unlike formal education which is attained at schools and colleges. It aspires at empowering the rural women of Sarai Mohana village to become economically independent by learning skills in tailoring and handicraft to make income which will contribute in meeting their personal and familial needs. The vision behind the empowerment unit for skilling women and providing them a source of earning is related to Krishnamurti's teachings about significance of education in contributing to social change and connecting to village communities surrounding REC.

Krishnamurti in his educational approach lays emphasis on human relationships (Thapan, 2022). These relations are both within and beyond school premises aligning to the surrounding village community. Education is a site for transformation. For Krishnamurti, it's a place where human beings learn to understand themselves and others (Thapan, 2022). In educational context, this understanding becomes essential in attaining peace and psychological freedom (Thapan, 2022). Conventional education systems make independent thinking constraining by

perpetuating social conditioning. As long as education does not create an integrated outlook on life, it has very little efficacy (Krishnamurti, 1953). Krishnamurti's vision on education and its significance in human life presents a holistic framework which redefines the confines of learning.

This paper is an outcome of one month of fieldwork from June 2025 to July 2025 conducted at the Unit for Women's Empowerment (UWE) at KFI Rajghat Education Centre. Situated on the banks of Ganges, Rajghat Education Centre reflects teaching and dialogue activities inspired by Krishnamurti's vision for freedom of individuals from the constraints of social structure which prevents total understanding of the world within and around (Krishnamurti, 1969). Rajghat Education Centre has four units – The Krishnamurti Centre (study centre), Rajghat Besant School (RBS), Vasanta College, and The Rural Centre. Rural Centre, the fourth unit of the Rajghat Education Centre, is divided into further sub-units forming a part of the outreach programme to ensure community engagement. It includes Sanjivan Hospital, Achyut Patwardhan School, The Unit for Women's Empowerment, Livestock Farm, and Agricultural Farm.

The Outreach Programme at Rajghat Centre brings into practice Krishnamurti's teachings which care not just about schooling but nurturing valuable and collective effort for the people in the surrounding villages. One of the crucial questions posed by Krishnamurti as responded by Meenakshi Thapan, the Director of Rishi Valley School was "What are we doing for the villages surrounding us" (Singh, 2024, p. 4). The essence of this question takes the idea of education and its reach to the village community in order to interact with people outside school.

UWE as a sub-unit of the Rural Centre at Rajghat is a prime example of stretching the field of education by taking it to the doorstep of women at Sarai Mohana and other surrounding villages to enable skill gaining through lifelong learning and adult education (Arslan et al., 2024). Built

on the teachings of Krishnamurti in contributing for the community and helping the underprivileged, UWE not just provide skills to the women but also focuses on the economic and social betterment of women by providing them a regular source of income which they could further utilize in their education, setting a small business, or meeting familial requirements. The idea of education is closely connected to Krishnamurti's teaching of knowing the self and becoming self aware of one's needs and actions through the process of 'seeing' and 'listening' (Krishnamurti, 1969). Its practice is experienced during the awareness sessions conducted with members at UWE by the teaching staff of Rajghat Besant School and the Officials at Rajghat Education Centre.

During the fieldwork, I observed that few girls working at UWE would leave around 2:00 p.m. in the afternoon, while the official time decided for its functioning is till 4:00 pm, as they had to look after their younger siblings and prepare food for the family. All members working at the unit were either school dropouts or graduated from high school. None of them went to college due to limited income and multiple siblings. In the process of imparting skills and envisioning empowerment, UWE as I argue in this paper enters into a negotiation with the familial domain by providing a space to the village women to socialize. Nambissan (2005) argues that control over women in families is linked to norms of appropriate behavior which revolves around the centrality of home and hearth in their lives. Household is the site of cooperation and conflict testing women's bargaining power (Agarwal, 1997). In this case, the UWE performs the task of negotiator with the familial domain which confines women to household chores and neglects their formal education. Agarwal (1997) point out, women's bargaining skills within households are deeply influenced by NGOs, women's movement and empowerment projects.

Through this paper, I delve into J. Krishnamurti's philosophy on education, which transcends formal spaces of learning and emphasizes on connecting with the surrounding local

communities. The paper further explores how this vision is translated into practice through the functioning of Women's Empowerment Unit at Rajghat Education Centre. It analyses how the unit following Krishnamurti's teachings seeks to empower the women from Sarai Mohana and neighbouring villages, and how in this process, UWE acts as a space for social interaction and engages negotiating the familial domain.

METHODOLOGY

This work is derived from a one month ethnographic study conducted at Unit for Women's Empowerment at the Krishnamurti Foundation India, Varanasi. Data collection has taken place through primary sources and secondary sources have been used in terms of literature to support the sociological analysis constructed from the findings. Throughout the fieldwork participant observation was followed to engage with the women at UWE and the village women in Sarai Mohana. The research remains qualitative in nature. In the first week of fieldwork I visited the UWE and held interactions with working staff and members. A questionnaire was prepared to accelerate interviews with the permanent and the women members which were primarily semi-structured. I actively participated at UWE with women and staff, had conversations while they were working and during tea breaks. I visited homes of the members working at UWE and had interactions with the in-charge of UWE, teaching staff at Rajghat Besant School, the Secretary and Chief Administrator of Rajghat Education Centre. During the multiple interactions in the first week, data from various follow up questions and life histories of women was also collected.

In the second week I shifted my focus inside the village. I visited village houses, had conversations with the village women following purposive and snowball sampling. Sample size read count of around 57 responses (young girls and women) in the age group from 18-40.

During the second and half of the third week fieldwork pertained to delving into the social realities of women's lives and to analyze their understanding of the empowerment project initiated by KFI. In the second half of the third week and first half of the fourth week I interviewed the officials of REC and the head of UWE using a semi-structured questionnaire in order to get a better understanding of the history of the unit and the vision behind it. In the second half of the fourth week the prominent focus again shifted back to the unit and its members where I had informal conversations to know the lives of women working at UWE.

KRISHNAMURTI'S VISION: CONNECTING TO THE COMMUNITY

According to Krishnamurti, the aim of education is to ensure freedom from conditioning, values, and tradition (Thapan, 2022). It is freedom to express oneself and observe one's own actions in the process (Krishnamurti, 2014). Keeping this vision in mind Krishnamurti's schools emphasis on 'right kind of education', which helps humans to experience the integrated process of life. Education at Krishnamurti's schools is not about gaining knowledge for scoring and securing positions but a means of forming relationships with human beings and nature (Krishnamurti, 2014). These relationships are not confined between teachers and students but extend to the surrounding village community.

As shared by the officials of Rajghat Education Centre that Krishnamurti carried a vision to work for the community that coexists with school in the surrounding villages. His heart was full of compassion for those left on the margins by mainstream society. During interviews the Secretary of Rajghat Education Centre, informed that "*Krishna Ji believed that we owe to the society we live in.*" Having a vision to contribute for the welfare of the underprivileged communities, the Secretary further shared, Krishnamurti invited Achyut Patwardhan, a close friend and an eminent socialist freedom fighter, in 1953 to Rajghat to set up the centre for rural work for the Sarai Mohana and surrounding villages. Intention for setting the Rural Centre was

to work for the villagers and create a partnership based on mutual respect, trust, and compassion. For Krishnamurti learning has to be joyful and entails the community at large (Krishnamurti, 1975). The outreach programme through community engagement at Rajghat shows a promise of ‘giving back to the society’ guided by Krishnamurti’s vision. The unit for Women’s empowerment keeps Krishnamurti’s vision alive by working for the welfare of the rural women. It provides a space where women can gather, learn new skills, get paid for the work they perform and share life stories.

Education is understood as a form of service to humanity, not merely a path to personal successes. Education is a transformative process that nurtures a sense of responsibility beyond formal schooling (Krishnamurti, 2006). Keeping a responsibility in mind towards the society UWE at Rajghat engages with the women of Sarai Mohana to open a platform for learning tailoring skills and becoming self-reliant by using those skills to make an income with intent to encourage empowerment. During my fieldwork at Rajghat I observed how the name of the unit focusing on empowerment is closely connected to Krishnamurti’s teachings of life and learning. By empowerment, the unit aims at enabling women to become capable of meeting their personal needs, contribute to their children’s education, and become psychologically free of the social conditioning, which even Krishnamurti talks about.

The work of UWE begins with skill based training which I analyze by connecting it to lifelong learning and adult education and seeing how it transcends the process of education beyond formal spaces like classrooms; it subsequently extends to providing women with sustainable source of income and conducts awareness sessions about their everyday needs and future goals with a vision to improve their socio-economic conditions. In the following sections, I discuss how by applying Krishnamurti’s teachings on education, Rajghat Education Centre takes the process of learning beyond the school space at UWE for promoting empowerment of the women from Sarai Mohana and neighbouring villages.

WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT UNIT: LEARNING OUTSIDE FORMAL EDUCATIONAL SPACES

The unit for women's empowerment was started in 1994 by KFI Rajghat Rural Centre under the outreach programme in order to engage with the community of Sarai Mohana and neighbouring villages. The purpose of UWE is to work for the village women to contribute a change in their lives by extending the corridors of education outside the sphere of formal spaces and redefining the process of learning. Learning which is beyond classrooms and schools, this focuses on adaptability which embodies the ability to modify one's behavior by attaining lifelong skills (Kumar, 2025).

UWE operates as a platform to provide a space to the women where they could gather, discuss community issues, learn new skills and find a means of livelihood in order to become self-reliant and sustain their families. Most of us, and most professional educators, hold a false view of schooling. It consists in the notion that it is the purpose of the schools to produce educated individuals holding certificates and degrees. The arena of education extends beyond classrooms whether schools or universities to skill based learning (Adler, 1952). This history of UWE covers the time period of three decades when began as a tailoring or stitching unit. The major focus was to train village women in stitching in the form of a training and skilling programme. The raw material, equipment, and stitching machines were provided by the KFI. Trainers and supervisors were appointed in order to mentor women. Women were trained in cutting clothes to completing individual tasks which involved stitching items such as kurtis, garments, shirts, etc. Gradually as women completed their training they were provided a source of livelihood by commencing work at commercial capacity.

Approximately 20-25 women were involved in the training-cum-production unit where they would stitch products such as kurti, blouse, shirt, garments, handbags, etc. They were

compensated at the end of every month depending upon the number of articles they have stitched. Stitching cost for every product would differ according to the amount of labour power and raw material invested into stitching. Training and commercial activities would go simultaneously at the stitching unit. A shop, bearing the similar name 'Sui-Dhaga', was also established in Mahmoorganj to retail the products stitched at the centre.

In 2005 the then director of KFI pioneered the GCARD (Girl Child All Round Development) programme for 'adult education' with the intention of expanding the reach of services of rural centre among the villagers. The GCARD Centre was opened inside the Sarai Mohana village for the purpose to encourage young girls and women to transcend domestic boundaries by facilitating a safe space for collective gathering and new learning. Community adult education encourages the development of comprehensive and coordinated delivery system for providing educational and recreational services for the community people (Brookfield, 1985). Young girls and women who were illiterate or school dropouts were educated along with training in handicrafts. Each day, the programme encompassed one hour teaching and subsequent three hours training in handicrafts. Women were taught simple crafts such as embroidery, crochet, making key rings, toys, bags, folders, and other items using fabric or jute. A monthly stipend of Rs.100 was provided to the girls and women who joined for training and those engaged in production were paid on the basis of number of items produced. During the fieldwork I was informed that on an average every woman engaged in the production process would earn a sum of Rs. 2000 and sometimes even more.

In 2018 REC officials merged both the units (stitching and handicraft) and it was renamed as 'The Unit for Women's Empowerment' comprising an in-charge, three full time salaried employees- an accountant, a supervisor, and a master-tailor, and the women members from the surrounding village. The in-charge is appointed on the recommendation of the officials (Secretary and Chief Administrator) of REC. The responsibilities of the in charge include the

range of tasks such as procurement of raw material for production, selecting textiles, innovation of designs, managing orders, executing sales, scrutiny of official records prepared by the accountant, and conducting regular visits to ensure consistent workflow.

The accountant handles the official file work pertaining to sales, purchases, and managing finance. The supervisor allocates work, monitors performance of each woman, keeps a record of number of items produced each day, and ensures quality check. The Master-tailor ensures the production of items and training of the women. The three permanent employees receive regular monthly salaries. At Present, nine women from the surrounding villages are working as members at UWE. Six of them are from Sarai Mohana, while one woman each comes from Loharpur, Dinapur, and Kotwan villages. The women working as members are paid monthly on a piece-rate basis.

Training remains central in both stitching and handicrafts. Even after the merger of both the centers, training continued to be the primary focus. In my analysis Skill development equips women with lifelong competencies that allow them to engage in income-generating work and move towards self-reliance. Lifelong learning is a type of learning which covers all formal and non-formal education activities. Lifelong learning is a continuous process to improve one's skills and abilities which contributes to economic independence and self-development (Arslan, Demirbag, & Dilmen, 2024). Lifelong learning promotes autonomy, self-realization, and social participation (Kumar, 2025). Although the training programme was suspended in the post-COVID period in 2022-23, women associated with the UWE have continued to acquire new skills. During my visits at UWE, the in-charge shared that producing items aligned with current market trends and aesthetic standards is the need of the hour. This approach would enable the women at UWE to acquire new skills and produce innovative items, which they could further use to start small home-based businesses or organize themselves into self-help groups (SHGs) to ensure self-sustenance.

Purvi, a graduate of the National Institute of Design, Assam, conducted an informal training session on embroidery for girls and women at UWE, in the presence of the in-charge. The session involved a demonstration-based approach, wherein she first illustrated the embroidery techniques herself and subsequently encouraged the participants to practice. She explained how a variety of designs could be created through embroidery and provided instruction on proper needle handling and movement to achieve precision in design. In addition, the session included a discussion on colour combinations, focusing on the selection of appropriate thread colors for different fabrics and strategies for further refining embroidery skills.

Master-tailor and supervisor play a significant role in training women in new design production methods. During the fieldwork, I observed the women engaged in producing items such as a pouch, wallet, mobile bag, scrunchie (hair tie), sling bag, and file cover. Decisions on what designs to follow are made by the in-charge after which the master-tailor prepares sample pieces to demonstrate the production process. The supervisor then provides ongoing assistance to ensure efficiency and effective learning. Within this framework, learning and earning operate simultaneously, as girls are remunerated based on the number of items produced, with wages determined by the time required and the level of skill and effort involved in creating each article.

The working model of UWE is oriented not only toward the imparting of lifelong skills but also toward creating opportunities for income derivation through the items produced by the women. To pay women for the items they produce and meet its operational cost, it is essential to maintain a continuous source of revenue. Accordingly, the unit sells the items produced by the women, and the revenue generated is re-invested to remunerate them for their labour. As observed during fieldwork, this cyclic model of production and payments enables the unit's day-to-day functioning while reinforcing the link between lifelong skill acquisitions and

economic participation. The following section examines how UWE's training and skilling programme operate to sustain this model and ensure unit's continued performance.

BEYOND TRAINING: BUILDING A SELF-SUSTAINING MODEL

Among the sources of income derivations Rajghat Besant School, Vasanta College, and the Study Centre remain the prominent players. UWE caters the needs of these three key entities in accordance to the demands which primarily involves tailoring requirements for the students, teaching, non-teaching, and support staff. Sales Exhibitions are displayed occasionally at RBS and Vasanta College for the entire Rajghat Education Centre community, whereas Study Centre guests make visits to UWE to engage in direct purchase. As informed by the in-charge of the unit during the interviews, orders are received intermittently from the sources external to the REC community, primarily influenced by the personal networks and affiliations of individuals within the community.

The handicraft unit once attracted a foreign buyer who provided raw materials and made payments to the unit, serving as a significant source of revenue. However, over time, the volume of orders declined, and to reduce costs, the buyer began sourcing directly from the village women instead of through the unit. Meanwhile, the stitching unit continued to meet the requirements of the REC, catering to its specific needs. A retail outlet named 'Sui-Dhaga' was established in Mahmoorganj but was eventually shut down due to insufficient profitability.

During my fieldwork I got to experience a two days exhibition sale organized by UWE at RBS on 29 June 2025 and 30 June 2025, before the commencement of classes after the summer break. A day before the sale exhibition hall was arranged properly. Items produced by the members of UWE were displayed for sale among which kurti, shirt, handbag, stationary kit, scrunchies, and mobile bag were the main products including various others. A day before the sale the accountant and the supervisor have to bring stock to the campus and place it in an

orderly manner in the exhibition hall. It is the responsibility of the in-charge to ensure proper arrangements. The Accountant and the supervisor deal with the visitors and handle payment under the supervision of in charge. Children come back to campus with their parents accompanying them. They visit the exhibition hall and make purchases.

The income generated from selling products is ultimately reinvested or used to support the operations of the unit itself. The cost elements include salaries of the permanent staff, procurement of raw materials, making monthly payments to the members, electricity charge, transportation cost, maintenance of the sewing machines, salary to the cleaners, and miscellaneous costs.

The UWE functions as an important source of livelihood for the women in villages neighbouring REC. Income generated through the unit is used in paying women for their work which is transferred directly into the women's bank accounts by the end of every month. While training programmes serve as a means of engaging village women in income generating activities, the unit also seeks to cultivate decision-making capacities and self-awareness through its social awareness sessions. As articulated by the in-charge of UWE, Krishnamurti viewed education as a liberatory process that frees individuals from social influences. The in-charge also responded during the interviews that empowerment cannot be understood solely in economic terms but also viewed as a process which makes an individual socially and psychologically free. Accordingly, the role of UWE is to foreground such efforts that enable women learning skills to become self-reliant economically, socially, and psychologically in alignment with Krishnamurti's vision. As Krishnamurti (1953) mentions, the educational process is not just limited to conventional institutional spaces but extends to engaging with the surrounding nature and humans to learn and attain freedom.

EMPOWERMENT UNIT: A GLIMPSE OF INDIVIDUAL AGENCY AND SPACE FOR SOCIAL INTERACTION

Sarla, a 50 year old married woman from Sarai Mohana, joined UWE when it was operating as a handicraft unit in her village, Sarai Mohana. However, when the unit shifted to the new building adjacent to Achyut Patwardhan School, her husband was reluctant to 'allow her' to continue learning and working at UWE. Sarla began working without her husband knowing about it. When her husband found out that Sarla is still continuing to work, he came to UWE and threatened the staff by saying that he will file a complaint against them. It was after advice from the villagers and Sarla's emphasis that he finally agreed. As shared by Sarla during my visits to the unit, her husband's income was insufficient to fulfill requirements of the household including everyday needs and education of the children. Sarla wanted to contribute financially to better support her family, but for her husband it was to compromise with his reputation in the community if his wife works outside. Challenging such social norms prevailing within the family and fighting for one's own rights forms the narrative of many women like Sarla, which symbolizes the essence of self-awareness. As for Krishnamurti (1969) self-awareness is freedom from conditioning. Self is made of memory, knowledge and experience, freedom comes from being aware of this structure as it operates (Krishnamurti, 1969).

Two main ways followed for empowering women at UWE are providing training to learn skills and source of livelihood. Various narratives collected during the fieldwork express the experiences of the women engaged with the unit. Savita, a 23 years old woman, has been working at UWE since 2020. During an interaction she told me that she aspires to start a small cosmetics shop in her village by making small savings from her earnings at UWE. She had to drop her studies after high school as her father was reluctant giving the reason of familial responsibilities and limited income. Her willingness to start a small business signifies the freedom to vision her future which she attained from making her own earnings by working at

UWE. Financial independence acted as a strong pillar in her life to aspire for a better good. Economic independence gave Savita the freedom to think and to invest her money in order to enhance her income.

Diksha, 31 years old, joined UWE when it was operational under the GCARD programme in Sarai Mohana. Diksha uses earnings from UWE for applying to government service examinations. She also saves a small amount every month in order to contribute to her wedding expenses. During a conversation about her life, she expressed that she did not want to be a burden to her father. She wants to be the 'son' rather than the 'daughter' to her family. In my analysis it presents a glimpse of the normative society where hierarchy is set between son and daughter within the family. Within the Patrilineal society a girl is seen as the temporary member of her natal family because she will eventually marry out (Dube, 1988).

The supervisor at UWE shared a couple of narratives which signifies UWE's role in empowering the women of Sarai Mohana. She told me that a few years ago there was a widowed woman in Sarai Mohana who was constantly coerced by the villagers to move back to her natal home along with her children so that they could cease her land. She approached UWE to ask for help. The matter was resolved, UWE provided her clothes, and one of her children was admitted to Achyut Patwardhan School and the other two in a government school. She herself started making baskets to sustain the living. Another narrative is from within the UWE, a woman working at UWE who had to halt her education after class 12. Knowing her aspiration to study, UWE supported her by funding her graduation; she further pursued post-graduation utilizing her earnings from the unit.

Mala, aged 30 years, works for UWE and currently works from home due to her young children. During our interactions, she shared that she always wanted to work, but managing work alongside caring for small children is challenging. She also mentioned that her husband

supports the decision to work. This unit gives her an opportunity to earn an income while working from home. She uses her money to purchase clothing for herself and her children and to meet household grocery needs. As a result, she no longer has to depend on her husband for her personal needs. UWE through its vision works upon the idea of economic empowerment by providing them livelihood. The amount which women make at the end of every month remains small, ranging from Rs. 2500-4000, but it encourages them to experience individual agency. They use their money on their personal needs, household requirements, and children's education. Alongside financial independence also arrives freedom to spend. To hold control over the self-earned money empowers women to strive for an improved and more promising future.

During my fieldwork an interactive session was conducted by the chief administrator of REC, to have a conversation with the women at UWE. During the session major emphasis was put on education and skilling. It aimed at encouraging women to learn for self-awareness. The official encouraged women to engage some of their time in doing physical activities such as exercise or yoga. She also proposed to set up a small library at UWE with a decent number of books available for women to spend their time reading. This motive is driven by the idea that education is not just about gaining certificates but also working on one's own self, which is closely associated with Krishnamurti's teachings. This session signifies the beginning of moving ahead from the traditional way of operating as an empowerment unit. The approach extends beyond livelihood generation and skill enhancement, encompassing reading and critical discussion as means to cultivate awareness among the women about the village and the surrounding area.

While engaging in its activities, UWE follows principles aligned with Krishnamurti's teachings, with a strong emphasis on social contribution, learning beyond formal spaces such as schools and colleges, and the cultivation of self-awareness. Self-awareness is essential for

attaining freedom from normative ways of living (Krishnamurti, 1969). Here I analyze the empowerment unit as a space which integrates self-awareness, skill-development, economic independence, and lifelong learning. Lifelong learning as women after learning skills from the unit can start home-based or market-based small businesses in tailoring and handicraft. Further, by engaging in women's social lives through provision of economic opportunities and conducting interactive sessions about their future, in my analysis, the unit acts as a space for social interaction between the REC community and the rural women through its everyday activities and especially during the awareness sessions and informal conversations. Here, empowerment becomes a process embedded in the social relations rather than a static outcome (Kabeer, 1999). It is located in spaces and interactions, not just individuals particularly (Kabeer, 2005). This approach enables the individual agency, at a certain level if not entirely, through sustained engagement with women during self-awareness sessions and by supporting them in becoming income-earning individuals. Economic independence (even earning small amounts of money) further enhances their agency by allowing them to spend on their personal needs, education, and household requirements. Economic empowerment, as mentioned by Stromquist (2015), is enabled through women's income, which makes them less dependent on their husband's decision making and more capable in making choices.

GENDER AND EDUCATION: NEGOTIATING THE FAMILIAL DOMAIN

The Unit for Women's Empowerment contributes to ensure the socio-economic well-being of the women from the surrounding villages of Rajghat Education Centre. Education, according to Krishnamurti, the very understanding of it which I came across from my fieldwork and living experience in Rajghat, is not about pen and paper or classroom bound learning. It is more about flourishing in varied ways. Having the freedom to develop bonds, to learn, and to move towards an all round development. Krishnamurti's understanding of education takes us ahead of the conventional methods of attaining knowledge. It is filled with a sense of purpose for both the

individual and the society. His comprehension of education involves not the schools and colleges for learning processes but also units ensuring the welfare of the communities who surrounding the REC community. The UWE has covered a long journey of around three decades. Its history reflects a fluctuating trajectory marked by altering periods of progress and setbacks. The empirical reality of UWE represents successes and challenges as the intrinsic components of the process which emphasis on women's empowerment. At the institutional level, challenges include managing economic accounts while ensuring sufficient profits to sustain the effective functioning of the unit. At the same time, UWE often negotiates the familial domain by focusing on the development of the lifelong skills and the provision of livelihood opportunities for women.

Kamala arrives at the unit at 10:00 a.m. She is currently learning to make new products such as handbags, mobile bags, and stationary cases. Her work begins with cutting fabric into accurate patterns, followed by stitching the pieces together in sequence. As she works, her hands and feet move rhythmically with the sewing machine. She often chats with her friends and giggles, creating a lively atmosphere. Kamala enjoys her tea breaks, though she misses having lunch with her friends at UWE, as she needs to return home by 2:00 p.m. Kamala is 18 years old. She was unable to attend school for several months due to construction work going on at her home. When she returned to school, she was informed that her name had been struck off the school register, and even her parents did not put any efforts to get her re-admitted. She has two younger sisters and a younger brother. As the eldest child, Kamala shared during our conversations that she is responsible for managing household duties while her parents are at work. Her day begins at 4:00 a.m., when she cleans the house, prepares food for the family, and collects water for drinking. She then comes to UWE and works for as much as she can until the afternoon. At 2:00 p.m., she leaves the unit to care for her siblings, prepare meals, and manage household responsibilities.

Diksha usually arrives around 11:00 a.m. and leaves by approximately 4:00 p.m. As the supervisor told, Diksha is required to complete her household chores before coming to the unit. Similarly, Meena and Rekha are permitted to attend UWE only after fulfilling their domestic responsibilities at home. On days when rituals or religious practices are observed in their households, they are not allowed to come to the unit. On weekends, particularly Saturdays, UWE is operational from 9:00 a.m. till 1:00 p.m. However, Diksha, Meena, and Rekha often choose not to attend on these days. They explained that by the time they are able to arrive only two or three hours of work remain, and they feel it is not worthwhile to come for such a short duration.

Unlike other members, Mala works from home due to her responsibility of caring for her young children. She visits UWE to submit her completed work and to collect the next set of tasks. During these visits, the supervisor provides her with fabric and thread and gives instructions on how to prepare the products. Mala primarily prepares the handbags, which she brings back to the supervisor for quality inspection. The supervisor then records her work, and Mala is paid at the end of the month based upon completed pieces.

In my analysis, while providing a space to women to learn skills and earn a living, UWE implicitly enters in engaging with the familial domain. Although the official working hours are from 9:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. from Mondays to Fridays only the permanent are required to adhere strictly to this schedule, and there is flexibility for other members. Making it feasible for the women to come and leave according to their convenience. During my fieldwork, I asked the supervisor, why do they not follow a fixed timing for the women members as well? The supervisor explained that if women are compelled to arrive early or prevented from leaving before 4:00 p.m., their families would not permit them to continue working at UWE. Thus, in my analysis, in its continued efforts to enable rural women to acquire lifelong skills and earn a living to become self-reliant, the unit also negotiates with the household imposed restrictions

on women by enabling mobility. Thus, it presents an interface of the public and the private domain where UWE as a space exists in opposition to the household space which confines women to patriarchal norms. It brings into light the role of educational institutions in dealing with the private domain (Chanana, 2002). The empowerment unit enables women to negotiate patriarchal constraints without confronting them individually (Kandiyoti, 1988). It signifies not merely as an employment generating unit but a space which allows women to learn, talk, and grow. It is a learning space where women gather, interact, and share moments of laughter before returning home to resume their household responsibilities.

EFFORT CONTINUES: THE PATH AHEAD

The vision document prepared by the heads handling UWE presents a modified view in which the working process and the lives of the women could be improved. The future vision document is prepared by the current in-charge of the unit, which was shared towards the end of my fieldwork on 15 July 2025. The presence of UWE in Sarai Mohana as a part of the Rajghat Rural Centre enshrines its relevance as a project for the upliftment of women. In my analysis, from the data which I collected after multiple interactions with the women at UWE, in Sarai Mohana, and with the officials at REC, women's empowerment for the UWE remains a dynamic process which entails wide range of aspects and this is to interpret which aspect would be covered at what point in time by the KFI which is widely inspired by both the ideology of Krishnamurti and the vision of the officials.

According to the vision document shared during the course of fieldwork at Rajghat by the in-charge of the UWE, the concept of women's empowerment enshrines a process of exploration. As discussed in the above sections, activities at the UWE intersect with lifelong learning, livelihood generation, and self-awareness. It involves a range of methods in which the KFI envisions to empower the women of the nearby villages. The focus in the future vision includes

skilling and livelihood. Skilling, according to the vision of the officials at REC, involves the totality of the skill which would enable women to organize themselves into Self-Help Groups (SHGs) to run independent small businesses. In between there exist short term goals focusing on handling the current situation and later on work on the long term vision.

The short term plan apart from the conventional ways of generating revenue from organizing exhibitions at KFI units and meeting the demands of the REC community, tries to focus upon starting a social media handle in order to take online orders across India. Alongside, it anticipates displaying merchandise using the space within RBS and the Study Centre in order to attract buyers. In the long run UWE aims to shift sourcing material from outside Varanasi to local to manage the cost of production. The goal is not to make profit but to generate revenue to the level where it could meet the requirements of UWE and can be used to flourish its function to serve the larger population.

Training involves a crucial aspect of UWE in its vision for women's empowerment. The skilling programme is to be initiated which will impart a spectrum of skills starting with the product design to selling strategy. Education in learning the financial aspect of running a business cannot be put into shadows. It requires constant effort from the officials, in charge and other specialists from the REC to volunteer to educate the women. Apart from tailoring women can also be trained in other categories such as preparing food items, soap making, and woolens. Women who would aspire to learn more than one skill will highly be appreciated to do so. Identification of the specialists to train the women and getting them in a time-tabled fashion is an essential task to ensure a systematic functioning of the skilling programme. A part of training will also desires to expose women to the success stories of community engagement from the other parts of the region and the nation in order to inculcate motivation.

The long term vision of UWE does not neglect the aspect of livelihood generation for women in the meantime while they work as a trainee. Women would continue to earn by making products which will be sold on various occasions in various units of REC. It also moves towards seeking benefit for women by availing the government funded schemes which encourages the formation of SHGs among women to earn a living. The three permanent employees will be to support the women trainees. Aim remains to dilute the structure which relies on the permanent staff for the working of UWE and to have women from the surrounding villages employed for the purpose on contract basis which will help UWE to cut cost of production and to maintain its funds for future investment within the unit. The vision expands ahead by recruiting one or two batches of young girls and women in order to teach them the skills related to the kind of activity they would wish to learn which ranges to tailoring, embroidery, soap making, food and woolen work. Training will start with learning how to source the raw material, make and understand the aesthetics of the product, identifying buyers, selling at a lucrative price, and being aware of the government schemes provided by the government. The vision document indicates the expected time period of 3-4 years to learn skills and encourages starting a business by organizing a group of women in a collective or a SHG. Another aspect of the long term vision also covers organizing weekly sessions on narratives around the region and giving conversations about the lifestyle, family, and social issues. Conducting visits at successfully running SHGs and such groups could be invited to visit UWE to encourage women and inspire them with its success stories. In my analysis, the future vision of UWE is inspiring yet challenging. In its journey of nearly 30 years UWE has gone through various stages of achievements and setbacks. The future vision document aspires to a new trajectory in the history of UWE. Its success totally depends upon the mutual efforts by the both REC community and women from nearby villages.

CONCLUSION

The Unit for Women's Empowerment, when understood through Jiddu Krishnamurti's philosophy of education, functions as an alternative educational space where learning as a process transcends formal classrooms and becomes embedded in everyday life. Through tailoring and handicraft training, UWE enables rural women to learn lifelong skills, earn an income, exercise agency, and envisions empowerment. It acts as a space for social interaction between the REC community and the village women. Flexible work arrangements and home-based production allow women to negotiate domestic responsibilities with participation in the unit, positioning UWE as a mediator between the private and public spheres. Economic independence, even when modest, enhances women's decision-making power in spending their earnings contributes to exercising individual agency at a certain level, if not entirely. By situating, UWE within Krishnamurti's broader vision of education as a transformative and liberatory practice, this practice highlights the significance of community-based educational and empowerment initiatives in addressing gendered equalities. Despite institutional and financial challenges, UWE illustrates how an educational institution led initiative for women's empowerment, grounded in compassion and social engagement, can foster incremental yet meaningful shifts from marginality towards agency among rural women.

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