

Federation Dialogues in Bihar

Report for
Center for Budget and Policy Studies



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1. Background

1.1 In the state of Bihar 14 federations were promoted of which, nine got registered as district level autonomous organisations under the Societies Act 1860. From these, six federations were invited to participate in the dialogues. Over a period of 10 days, dialogues were held with three federations at three different locations. 85 women leaders in their capacity as Executive Committee and General Body members of these federations, actively participated in the dialogues. In addition to the federation leaders, meetings were held with sangha members to understand their current status and their impressions of the federation's contribution to their struggles, achievements and future actions. A total of 200 members representing 12 sanghas attended the dialogue meetings held in seven different locations in Gaya and Muzaffarpur.

1.2 Dialogue schedules

Date of the dialogue	Location	Host Federation	Participating Federations	No of participants*	Facilitators
Aug 26-27, 2017	Federation Field Centre, Sasaram	Samrudhi Sansthan, Rohtas	Deep Mala district Federation, Kaimoor; Samrudhi Sansthan, Rohtas	31	Ms. Urmila, Ms. Pushpa, and Ms. Santosh
Aug 28-29, 2017	Federation Resource Centre, Dobhi, Gaya	Hamari Drishti District Federation, Gaya	Hamari Drishti district Federation, Gaya	29	As above
Oct 7-9, 2017	Seva Sadan, Muzaffarpur	Jyoti Mahila Samakhya district, Federation, Muzaffarpur	Jyoti Mahila Samakhya district Federation, Muzaffarpur; Shristhi Federation, Seohar; Pragti Ek Prayas, Sitamarghi	25	Ms. Pushpa, Ms. Vandana Mahajan and Ms. Santosh

The six federations who participated in the dialogue were on average, 11 years old and operated as registered autonomous organisations with no external support to manage their day to day affairs. Unlike other Mahila Samakhya (MS) programmes, federations in Bihar have been registered as district entities and not as block level entities. Ms. Savitri, one of the leaders from Muzaffarpur explained that the reason for this was closer proximity with the district implementation units of MS and cutting costs of federation overheads, which allowed for greater learning opportunities and gave better access to district level offices and programmes.

1.3 Participants details

Most of the women who participated in the dialogues belonged to the most marginalised sections of society, which included dalits, maha dalits such as Mushahars and OBCs. The participants included General Body (GB) members, Executive Committee (EC) members and former staff of Bihar Mahila Samakhya Society.

Federation Dialogues in Bihar

Sl. No.	Name of the Federation	District	No of participants
1	Samrudhi Sansthan	Rohtas	24
2	Deep Mala Sansthan	Kaimoor	5
3	Hamari Drishti	Gaya	29
4	Jyoti Mahila Samakhya Federation	Muzaffarpur	15
5	Pragti Ek Prayas	Shivhar	05
6	Shristi Federation	Sitamarghi	05

1.4 Session Plan

A common plan for the dialogues was prepared by the facilitators, which is given below:

Day	Session/ Activities	Process	Facilitators
Day One	Introduction, background to workshop, Objectives	Plenary/ Ice Breakers	Urmila, Pushpa and Santosh for Gaya and Rohtas
	Self-Reflection - 'My Journey with sanghas and federations'	Individual participants to reflect	Vandana, Santosh and Pushpa for Muzaffarpur
	Key areas of work and achievements	Small group discussions/ plenary presentations	
Day Two	Governance, leadership, membership - current status, issues and future plans	Work in small groups, and plenary presentations	
	Resources - current status, Sources, and plans for mobilisation of resources		
	Relationship with sangha - current status, Issues and future plans		
	Sustainability- vision for future		

The process adopted was also the same. All the sessions were conducted through discussions in small group followed by presentations in plenary. The facilitators tried their best to ensure that each of the participants got an opportunity to lead the presentations. This was to build a shared ownership on the claims made on achievements and vision articulated for future.

Day One: Federation Dialogue

2.1 Introductions, Background and objectives of the dialogues

The dialogues began with a few songs and dances (songs and dances in Sasaram and Dobhi, Gaya) by the participants, followed by a round of self introductions. Since all the participants were members of either the EC or the GB of federations and had years of association with each other the facilitators did not feel the need to go through lengthy processes and ice breakers. The introduction session was followed by a brief discussion on the objectives of the dialogues, which were:

- The federation's journey so far, including major achievements and challenges
- Role of federation in future
- Support required by federations to operate effectively

Concerns were expressed by some of the women leaders over a slack in federation activities due to closure of the MS programme. Some of the concerns raised were:

Tara Singh (Secretary, Samrudhi Sansthan) *'We are capable of handling local level issues, but we feel constrained in connecting to the larger world. When MS was there we were getting so much information. Now that is gone. We feel we are all alone'*. This may be true for all the federations.



Urmila (Deep Mala Federation) says *'we have been left to fend for ourselves, we are out, but not down. We try our best to keep ourselves relevant. Many things we used to do are beyond our capacity now. We want to go back to our old days of activism and all that hulla gulla'*.

The resource person responded that the concerns were very genuine and the agenda of the workshop was also to try to seek answers to these very concerns and fears and collectively decide, through the planned dialogues, what needs to be done.

2.2 Self Reflections- “My Journey with the sangha and federation”

The objective of this exercise was to help participants reflect on their own journey with the federations. They were asked to articulate their major struggles and how they overcame them, how they perceive their identity in the family and society, were the achievements worth the struggle they went through? Some of the participants had difficulty in writing hence they drew and painted pictures, composed songs depicting their time with MS. As facilitators, it was amazing to witness the intensity of each woman's experience. There were some members who captured their journey through drawing, painting and singing. All the 85 participants who attended the dialogue had unique stories to share.

Sita Devi, (Jyoti Mahila Samakhya Federation, Muzaffarpur) - *“I am no more vulnerable, I have found emotional, social and political support from my sangha sisters. I have achieved the unimaginable by being a member of the sangha and federation.”*

Kashmira (a child bride from Mushahar community) - *“I was like a dry leaf, with no direction. MS gave me strength to stand on my own feet. Now, no wind can take me with it. I take the path that I want to.”*

Urmila (Deep Mala Federation) *“I came to realise my worth after I associated myself with the sangha and federation. Attending federation meetings was like going to your parent's home (maika). I would choose federation meetings over any family function. I wait for federation meeting to flaunt my best attire.”*

Sukhmani (Samrushi Sansthan) - compared herself with a piece of barren land which turned into a garden full of brightly coloured flowers, chirping birds and trees laden with fruits, after joining her sangha.

Savitri (President, Jyoti Mahila Samakhya federation, Muzaffarpur) – *“my self-confidence, public image, financial power and decision making power at home, all this I attribute to the sangha and federation. All the places I have travelled to and meetings that I have attended with senior government officers, were due to the federation and sangha. I can not tell how much have I gained from this movement.”*

Chandramani (Gaya federation) – *“After I became sangha member, I realised that every women must be empowered like I am, and be able to understand their problems and take decisions on their own. If I had not joined MS, I would not have learnt to talk and had a chance travel. Today I hold a position of respect in my family and in society.*

Each member's' journey was a story of immense courage, determination with faith in their sanghas and federations. Some women were beaming with a sense of self-worth and pride because of what they had achieved during their journey with MS. Some of the key changes that women attributed to their association with MS included:

- People accept them as wise and approached them to get an opinion on most things
- Confidence to speak to government officials, police and politicians
- No more fear of authority
- Good communication skills and able to manage difficult situations
- One woman said that she had gone from being illiterate to becoming a graduate because MS had provided her the opportunity to educate herself. She said that she had never dreamt of such an achievement. Her husband who is illiterate is uncomfortable of this, but he never argues with her on matters of knowledge and information

The members attributed all these changes to their association with and memberships in their sanghas and federations, and fully endorsed the need for a programme like MS to reach the thousands of women who needed it. They claimed that MS was the only programme which had impacted them so positively.

2.3 Past work-Major achievements by federation

After the self-reflection exercise, a detailed discussion was conducted to document the major achievements of the federations. Since the federation leaders did not separate their work with that of the MS programme, the facilitators attempted to bring some clarity on the inherent differences between both agendas. The discussion helped bring out clarity as one of the participants commented- “we held so many *dharnas* and *gheraod* police stations to demand accountability from the enforcement agencies. Those actions were self driven and not paid for. Another participant claimed that close to 500 Mushahar girls from her community were identified and enrolled into KGBV schools, a result of empathy towards girls from less privileged communities. She said that the MS project did not pay the federation to do this work. The discussions were followed by an exercise in small groups, on major achievements of the federation and sanghas. In total, 14 sub groups were formed in the three different dialogues (in Bihar), to list out the achievements of the federations.

The groups were given the following questions as reference points:

- On which issues or areas has the federation worked on?
- What have been the major achievements of the federation under each of the intervention areas?

The presentations given by the federations in response to the questions above were as follows: (for achievements by individual federations one may refer to reports of respective federation dialogues attached as annexures)

- 2.3.1 Literacy and Education for women and girls:** Identified as one of the most important interventions by the federations, the number of girls and women brought under various initiatives, speak for themselves.
- From Gaya alone 8736 adolescent girls and adult women were enrolled in *Jagjagies*.
 - Over 10,000 girls were enrolled into government schools.
 - About 9000 villages from areas under federation coverage were declared as total enrolment villages.
 - 1000 women participated in *Mahapariksha* out of which 100 received 5th grade certificates.
 - About 500 women started their education after coming into contact with MS, and studied up to graduation.
 - Many graduates of KGBVs and MSKs became police, teachers, karate masters and Anganwadi workers. Hundreds of women have become ASHAs.
 - All federations but Shivhar, reported having 100 percent enrolment of girls from sangha families, into schools. Sanghas played the role of watch dog, to ensure that all girls from sangha families got enrolled into schools, MSKs or KGBVs
 - *Jagjagies* and informal literacy centres for adult women were listed out as major achievements by the federations. The federations claimed that all the members of sanghas who joined before 2012 were given literacy classes. Not a single member is illiterate, and they refuse to give their thumb impressions.
 - Publishing *Khabar Lahriya* and running literacy camps for SC community women in seven villages of Shivhar was listed as another major achievement by Shivhar federation.

Managing and running MSKs, forming Meena Manchs in schools, actively participating in SMCs, and monitoring KGBVs, are also achievements listed out by the federations.

- At *Jagjagies* sites, training was regularly conducted on *Panchayati Raj* (rights and responsibilities of Elected Women Representatives), health, hygiene and reproductive rights of women, and were all treated as core elements of education and empowerment of women and adolescent girls.
- Partnered with UNICEF and ran MSKs for four years.
- Special literacy camps were held for SC women.
- In three villages of Rohtas alone 50 Mushahar girls were sent back to school.
- Federations were key partners of MS and SSA for identifying out of school girls and ensuring they go back to schools or KGBVs.
- Keeping vigil on girls in danger of early marriage was one of the most important roles that the federations took upon themselves.
- Federations strongly believe that their hard work with the community helped young girls break many barriers and social taboos which paved the way for their mobility and access to better opportunities.
- Almost every SMC in sangha villages had at least one sangha representative on the committee. 2600 alternative centres of learning and literacy were run by federations in as many villages. These centres were run for several years resulting in thousands of women taking certification exams conducted by National Institute for Open Schooling.

Sangeeta (from Gaya) aptly summed up by saying, *“everything we discussed in sangha, federation, GB, EC and Unit meetings were so educating and empowering, that we always looked forward to these meetings”*.

Issues and challenges, as perceived by federations, in furthering the agenda of education and literacy:

Federations expressed their discontent over the closure of MSKs and *Jagjagies*. They said that earlier whenever they heard of a girl in difficulty (victim of sexual harassment and or at risk of it, at risk of getting married at early age, etc.), they could take her to a nearby MSK for shelter. However, with the discontinuation of MSKs, the federations have no safe place to offer. There are no such arrangements for girls. KGBVs are formal institutions and follow a rigid process of admission.

Pramila - *“Chinky was abused by her father for months together. There was an MSK in Sasaram where we could provide her with good care and learning opportunities. Such a support system is not available to us anymore. What would be happening to so many girls who have nowhere to go?”*

Lack of community involvement in the selection of girls for KGBVs

With the closure of the MS programme, the federations and sanghas are finding difficult to keep up their relationship with the KGBVs and are seeing a gradual degradation in their inclusive approach. Earlier the role of the community was important in deciding the list of girls for enrolment. The real needy girls from the most vulnerable backgrounds were given preference. This has now changed.

The biggest regret that the women had was that there were no more prospects for their own learning. Earlier they used to get these opportunities to learn to read and write at various meetings and training programmes. Now such opportunities no longer exist.

2.3.2 Countering violence against women and girls -

The federations and sanghas are well aware that they enjoyed immense credibility and good will in their community and also in the police stations, block level departments, etc. The women often took on cases of violence against women and girls, and resolved them. In fact, action taken by the federation members in 57 very difficult cases, were often referred to by the six federations. These excluded the number of

domestic violence cases solved by the Nari Adalats including crimes of heinous nature such as rape, murder, dowry deaths, witch hunting, and atrocities against SC women.

In almost all the cases, sanghas and federation women stood up against the police department and powerful local upper caste people, inviting hostility and threat to their own safety. A recent case was from Muzaffarpur in which the accused was a close relative of the MLA who had raped a minor scheduled cast girl. The strength of the collective was such that at any given time they were able to mobilise some hundred women for a sit-in protest to put pressure on the police and or local administration to take action against the perpetrators. However there were other strategies which the federation and sanghas also used. In Muzaffarpur, the women built social pressure on the perpetrators by holding village *sabhas* to mobilise support for a victim of witch hunting. Knowledge of the law and the responsibility shown by enforcing agencies, also helped the sangha and federations in creating a positive opinion in the community. The federation leaders proudly noted that whenever there was a complicated case brought to the *panchayat* many of the leaders invited sangha members for their advice. Recommending and forwarding cases of domestic violence, disputes between husband and wife, etc to sangha and Nari Adalats by the Panchayat Presidents is a normal practice now.

All the participating federations had many cases and incidences of violence against women (VAW) and girls where they had successfully acted as local pressure groups, and held enforcement agencies accountable. The work on VAW was done on two fronts. At the one hand, with grassroots level support from sanghas, federations took direct action against the perpetrators by ensuring comprehensive support to survivors of violence, and on the other, social barriers and taboos towards sexual violence, were constantly challenged and deconstructed through gender training, *Jagjagi* classes and Nari Adalat meetings.

The federations claimed that the goodwill they enjoy as mediators in the delivery of justice, was well accepted by the community. Even the police, *panchayat* leaders and other officials, acknowledged their credibility. Almost all the participants admitted that today, no one questioned the decision of federations in cases brought to Nari Adalats and to the sanghas.

Nari Adalats are the most unique experiment to address domestic violence (DV). All federations run Nari Adalats though the numbers have come down significantly in last two years. Except Muzaffarpur, all the five federations namely Rohtas, Gaya, Kaimoor, Shivhar and Sitamarghi are running two to three Nari Adalats in as many blocks. Muzaffarpur is the only district which has six fully functional Nari Adalats, which meet monthly and attend to cases of DV. In last five years, a total of over 500 DV cases have been dealt with by the federations. The Muzaffarpur federation alone has dealt with 150 DV cases, 15 cases of witch hunting, five cases of atrocity against SC women. In Rohtas, 402 cases of violence against women and girls including cases of DV, female infanticide, dowry harassment, eve teasing, bigamy, desertion and child custody, have been dealt with by the five Nari Adalats run by the federation.

The federation boasts of having organised 22 protests including seven large rallies against gang rapes, five *gheraos* at the local police station against dowry deaths, and seven silent rallies against sexual harassment and eve teasing. In each of these, the federation was able to mobilise 200-3000 sangha members. **Tara** (from Rohtas) commented that resources or no resources, sangha women were always ready to come together to take action against such crimes. She said, "Earlier, we had the means to inform every one in the network and mobilise them in large numbers. Now women take action at the local level, with support from neighbouring villages. Even if the federation closes down, sangha women will not stop acting, though their capacity to sustain the protest and agitation will be limited." Some of the most heinous cases taken up by federations and sangha were as follows:

Dowry death - late Parvati Devi was a victim of dowry death. The federation mobilised 3000 women and *gheraod* the Shiv Sagar police station demanding immediate arrest of her husband who the federation accused of murdering her. Due to federation's action, the case caught media' attention. Three persons were attested and jailed.

Rape and murder- late Madhuri was raped and murdered by her father-in-law. The police did not register an FIR because the father-in-law had bribed the person in-charge of Padri block police station. The federation mobilised about 500 women and did not allow the cremation till the district collector reached the spot and registered an FIR. The federations demanded the arrest of Madhuri's father-in-law, and the suspension of the station In-charge was accepted by the district collector.

Death by poisoning – late Shabnam, a resident of Kaimoor was poisoned by her husband who was in a relationship with another woman. Shabnam refused to leave her matrimonial home as she had the support of the Nari Adalat. Frustrated with her constant presence and defiant attitude, Aleem, her husband decided to get rid of her by poisoning her food. Agitated with police apathy and delay in arresting the culprit the federation women protested against the police In-charge and *gheraoed* the local station. A Gram Sabha was also organised by the federation to garner community support. It also ensured that there was enough media coverage and the culprits were not let go easily. Aleem was finally arrested and put behind bar. Tara says each time they gathered for such protests there was a new bonding between members. Their respect in their community also grew many fold.

Witch hunting- Even though the federations have intervened in nearly 20 cases of witch hunting, the women expressed concern over the complexities of these cases. The reasons cited were community mind set coupled with propaganda by vested interests. Another reason was that there was hardly any time for the victim or for external people to take preventive measures. The entire society/community becomes hostile making it difficult for outsiders to intervene. A joint study in partnership with People for Law in Development was conducted in selected villages under federation coverage. The findings were made public and work on the issue of witch hunting was taken up with a structured approach.

Child Trafficking - The issue of child trafficking was recognised as the most critical to act against by the Shivhar and Sitamarghi federations. These two districts share their borders with Nepal. The federation managed and run a Child Help Line since their inception, and have rescued 100 of girls and children. The federation leaders claimed that they had very good relations with the police officials on the other side.

Issues and challenges as perceived by federations, in sustained action to counter VAWG

- Forms of violence against women have changed drastically. Cases of bigamy, desertion and cheating are on the rise requiring immediate shelter for the victims. The MSKs which doubled as shelters for these women and girls no longer exist and federations find it difficult to help beyond a point.
- Almost all federations spoke about increasing violence against girls especially in forms of cyber crimes. They admitted their limitations in understanding in such issues and a lack of opportunities to regular training and refresher courses on new subjects were identified as challenges.
- Operating Nari Adalats in their full potential was resource intensive. Federations feared that they may have to close down these Nari Adalats as it was becoming difficult for them to take care of basic expenses such as travel reimbursement of the members. With the disintegration of sanghas at the village level, the cases brought to Nari Adalats have decreased. Earlier there was a bottom up structure which has fast disappeared in the last two years. Nari Adalats are finding it difficult to remain relevant.

- Many government programmes such as Jeevika have also started initiatives such as Social Justice Committees at the village organisation levels. While these committees are no comparison to the experience and reputation of the Nari Adalats, the reorganisation to these committees by the formal structures (government department) has shifted the attention from Nari Adalats to these government led committees. Nari Adalats have started facing an identity crisis in many places.
- Exodus of good, articulate and strong leaders to Jeevika programme was also seen as a major challenge by the federations.

2.3.3 Participation in Panchayats, local electoral processes and implementation of government programmes

Federations see themselves as enablers and capacity builders for sanghas, the grassroots face of the federations. Almost all the sanghas that were visited and had dialogues with, shared their familiarity with local governance structures and their role in Gram Sabhas. Building curriculum, organising training for EWRs and in general for members to know their rights vis-à-vis panchayats, are some of the tasks that federations have taken upon themselves. The federations claimed that the 50 percent reservation for women announced by the Bihar government came in much later. The sanghas had already started making in-roads claiming their due space in these bodies. One of the major interventions towards institutionalising convergence with panchayats at the Gram Sabhas was to form a small committee of 4-5 members within sanghas, and entrusting them with the responsibility of taking up issues pertaining to Gram Sabhas and panchayats. A similar committee with the mandate of consolidating sangha work with respect to panchayats was also formed at the Unit. These committees were provided constant support by panchayat committees at the federation. All federations have the same structure.

The solidarity among sangha members was very strong. If in a village, two candidates filed nominations for the same seat, the sangha would take a call on who should withdraw. In many instances, federations campaigned for sangha members.

While the federations played a role in developing sangha members' understanding on citizenship, roles and responsibilities of EWS and influencing members' decision to support a common candidate from sanghas, the sanghas at the local level ensured that members actively attend Gram Sabhas and subsidies from panchayats reach them. The committee which was formed at the sangha level had two key mandates - actively engage in Gram Sabhas and panchayats to ensure sangha members received various schemes under panchayats, b) ensuring women's participation in Gram Sabhas. The numbers of members, who were helped by sanghas in receiving benefits under various panchayats schemes, are massive. In Rohtas alone, 14,500 women and girls were provided with benefits such as Indira Awas Units (3750), enrolment for Antyodaya Yojna (2987), 4987 girls for bicycle, and 3321 for School Uniforms, 2177 women were issued Marriage Certificate with help from sanghas. All federations have large numbers on achievements of benefits. These are reported in individual federation reports attached as annexures.

During meetings with sanghas as part of the dialogues members shared how women were never encouraged to attend meetings. In addition, there was a self inflicted exclusion due to social restriction on women's mobility. But today, the more number of sanghas in a village, better is the participation and awareness among women on their rights as its stakeholders.

Women believed that the sanghas were very strategic in their approach to panchayats and the Gram Sabha. Their interface in the sabhas was slow and gradual as there were strong possibilities of a backlash. The women said that attending Gram Sabha was not taboo for women any more.

Samundari (from Phool Samooh) recalled- *“In the beginning, not many people were happy with us meeting regularly and discussing affairs of panchayats, Anganwadi, health centres, schools, women’s situation etc. Our meetings were causing a great deal of discomfort to men, especially upper caste powerful men. First they used men from our own families to restrict our mobility and put an end to these meetings. When we did not stop, they started questioning our integrity. Our strong belief in each other helped us overcome these back lashes”*.

Manju and other sangha members from Chaturi Punash village narrated an incident where they forced the panchayat members to vacate the dais for sangha women. She recalled that they did not like the idea of being seen as inferior in front of the men. They had invited the sangha leaders to resolve a family dispute. *If they considered the sangha women so knowledgeable and worthy of giving opinions, then why were they not allowed to sit on the dais alongside men?* She said that the sangha women (Manju and others) asked them to leave their seats or bring more chairs so that all could be accommodated. Manju recalled that the men were terribly uncomfortable as they had never imagined women would publically demand for something like that.

There was a time when members needed constant follow up by MS staff or federations during EC/GB meetings, to encourage them to attend the Gram Sabha. However now no one needs to remind them. They now attend these meetings on their own initiatives, as many government schemes are discussed here. Some times sangha members accompany other women from the village to the Gram Sabha to raise an issue on behalf of the woman.

Issues and challenges vis-à-vis enabling sangha members’ participation in local governance

The interface with panchayats and Gram Sabhas mostly happens at the sangha member level. The sangha members both as individuals and as a collective did not see any challenge in dealing with panchayats or in contesting elections, supporting their favourite candidates, and raising issues in the Gram Sabhas. However, the periodical training they used to receive on panchayats have stopped. The active support of women from other villages may not be forthcoming in the absence of an active federation. With the sanghas closing down, meetings have become irregular and discussions on issues related to panchayats rarely take place. When asked whether the disintegration of sanghas would have any impact on the panchayat Presidents’ response to issues brought by individual women identified as Mahila Samakhya sangha members, the sangha women said that they were not very sure. They said that sangha has created a strong identity. At the local level it would not make any difference.

Also, benefits from social security schemes and other welfare schemes for the most marginalised may not come through as the collective at the village level ceases to exist. These women may face issues in approaching panchayats, Gram Sevaks and others for getting their work done. Many women supported the idea of women getting into active politics. They said *“at least we will have some one to go to if we have any issue.”*

2.3.4 Enabling access to Entitlements and economic empowerment of sangha members-

The federations and sanghas have addressed the issues of livelihoods promotion and economic empowerment from the rights based approach. Womens' rights over Gochar land, community ponds for fish cultivation and irrigation and common land for plantation etc were considered as important areas for intervention for women to reclaim ownership over them. Another area the federations and sanghas actively intervened in was programmes such as MGNREGA, where they created pressure on the panchayats to issue job cards to women and ensured equal wages for women. In Muzaffarpur and Kaimoor 871 and 1025 sangha members were linked to MGNREGA respectively. Women *Meths* (Work site supervisors) were trained by federations who later got recruited by Block offices to oversee MGNREGA works.

Another important intervention according to the federations was to ensure 2women's' access to benefits from government schemes such as pensions, ration from fair shops, land *pattas*, houses under Indira AWAS/ PM Awas Yojana among others. In Rohtas the federation helped 3750 women access IGAY subsidies. Similarly, 2987 women were registered under Antyodaya Yojana. The federations argued that a pension did ensure regular flow of income while rations from fair price shops ensured food security for her family. 563 sangha members were helped by the Kaimoor federation alone in enrolling for widow and old age pension. 181 sangha members were enrolled for Antyodaya Yojana in Kaimoor.

The savings and credit groups formed within sanghas was considered as the most critical step by the federation in order to support and expand income generating activities taken up by members. The cumulative amount which was loaned out by sanghas to members stands at over Rs. 30 million. Thousands of small enterprises have been supported with these loans. Encouraged with the positive outcomes of the small loans given out to members, the Jyoti Mahila Samakhya, Muzaffarpur started a small credit programme called APNA BANK with a capital fund of Rs. 14 lakhs. So far, 300 members have availed loans from the APNA BANK.

Savitri Devi (Secretary, Muzaffarpur federation) states that hundreds of women were trained in masonry and hand pump repairing by the federations. The federations reported having trained more than 500 sangha members as masons and hand pump mechanics. In Rohtas alone, 352 Mahila masons were trained. The idea was to break the stereotype and enter into an occupation dominated by men, but the intention was also to make these women financially independent. **Rampari** (Shivhar Federation) further claimed that running of community kitchen in large numbers, providing mid-day meal in schools, and Poshahaar to ICDS centres, running production centres for sanitary napkins, running outlets at KGBVs, MSKs and sanghas were some of the important initiatives by sanghas and federations to promote women's economic independence. There were many such initiatives which federations talked about.

Sanitary napkin production centres, vermi-compost beds, supplying school uniforms, supplying vegetables to KGBVs, running mess in KGBVs and Mahila Samakhya run MSKs were some of the large scale income generating activities that provided regular incomes to sangha members. The federations in Gaya and Muzaffarpur set up a production centre for sanitary napkins. In two centres, 30 women were involved in production and marketing of napkins. The Gaya federation has got into a MoU with PRATHAM Skill Centre in Gaya and Varanasi to provide catering services. The money is used to run regular activities such as EC and GB meetings, Nari Adalats and responding to sanghas requests for support.

Challenges

- All the initiatives which involved women as producers/beneficiary, entrepreneurs, were routed through Mahila Samakhya by signing MoUs with concerned departments. Federations were seen as field implementation units of the Samakhya. Other than one or two small projects with UNICEF ,no MoU has been signed directly between federations and the concerned departments. With Mahila Samakhya's closure, federation cannot sustain these projects on their own. The mid-day meal, sanitary napkin production centre, supply of vegetables in KGBVs and MSKs, etc. all had to stop as the departments had no confidence in federations' capacity to manage these programmes on their own.
- Most departments have started a bidding system. Proposal writing has become very cumbersome and technical. Federations find it difficult to compete with other NGOs. **Sunita Kumari** (Secretary, Muzaffarpur Federation) aptly put it when she said, *"no one can deliver results like we do, but we do not how to market ourselves. With no more Mahila Samakhya didis around on a regular basis we are left to fend for ourselves."*

- In Bihar, Jeevika has large numbers of women mobilised into Savings and Credit (SHG) groups. Since it is a government sponsored programme most of the field activities are given to these SHGs/ village organisations to implement.

These were the broad areas in which federations have achieved remarkable success. However, they agreed that their capacity to intervene systematically in income generating endeavours was limited. They accepted that their focus largely was on social issues and they looked at womens' economic empowerment as closely linked to their right over productive assets. Hence livelihoods and income generation initiatives were the first one to get severely affected after closure of Mahila Samakhya programme. All leaders agreed that they have made remarkable contribution to girls' and womens' literacy, political empowerment and in countering violence against women and girls.

Day 2: Federation dialogues

Day two began with a brief recap by the participants followed by a couple of songs from representatives of each district. Before starting the session, the resource persons sought some clarifications on the presentations given by the federation leaders the previous day, on achievements and challenges. On the first day, we tried to look at the strengths of the federations and the challenges they faced in each of the thematic area if they were to continue working on those areas.

The next set of questions we wanted look in to were internal to the organisations - governance, leadership, membership and relationship with member sanghas, sources of resources etc. An in-depth understanding on these areas was necessary to determine the areas of work (both internal to organisation and external) in future.

3.1 Session 1: Membership, Governance and Structures

The plan for the day was explained by the resource persons to the participants in detail. The sub-groups which were formed previous day were re-grouped, so that every one gets a chance to know more number of participants and about their work with federations. The presentations given by the day two sub groups, around each of the questions as under, are given below:

3.1.1 Criteria for providing group membership:

- Sanghas target the most marginalised women to become members. Deserted, single, widow and survivors of sexual and domestic violence are treated as priority groups.
- No woman wanting to join is excluded from sangha membership.
- In some instances women were asked to leave the group as they did not conform to sangha/ federations values and beliefs.

3.1.2 Process of electing members for governance structures- Cluster Committee, General Body, Executive Committee:

- The governance is bottom up, democratic and transparent- From group to cluster to block to district
- A bottom up system exists for electing the governance structures. The sanghas sends (through unanimous decision), two members to the cluster committee. 10 villages make one cluster.
- From each cluster committee two members are selected for Unit Committee. A Unit is made of 50 villages/10 clusters.
- Five members are elected from each Unit to represent in the federation General Body.
- The General Body members elect 11 members from among themselves for the Executive Committee (EC).
- The EC elects three office bearers namely Secretary, Treasurer and President.

- It was informed that only those sanghas which were rated strong were eligible to take part in the election process.

The plenary asked what the plan was to strengthen the membership in view of the current situation where large number of sanghas was heading towards disintegration. The leaders were of the view that they would take responsibility of the cluster they belonged to and visit each sangha regularly with new information every time. Moreover, the Nari Adalats would be made much more active to work on issues of social concerns and not only on DV matters alone. The members emphasised the role of Nari Adalats in reviving membership and sanghas. The members shared how federations have tried their best to keep sanghas intact, but without financial resources and regular projects it is difficult to keep in regular touch with the sanghas.

4. Strengthening sanghas and federations' identity and visibility

The next presentation was on the challenges faced in keeping federations' identity alive and intact and overall sustainability of sanghas and their apexes.

- Strengthen the weak groups
- Strong groups to be linked with the federation
- Federation to actively ensure that the rights and entitlements of the sangha women reach them directly
- Federation must gain knowledge about other organisations, be proactive in seeking partnerships, collaborations and network with programmes and organisations with similar mandate
- Federation must take up issues of both practical and strategic needs for revival of identity, become more relevant for its member sanghas
- Federations need to rethink its strategy of survival. It should consult its member sanghas before taking up any project, and ensure that all the women benefit and not only a few. The federations in Muzaffarpur and Gaya presently seem to be caught up in survival of the apex structure. A small group of leaders seem to be engaged in some small projects which do not include the larger membership. APNA BANK and catering contracts with PRATHAM by Muzaffarpur and Gaya federations respectively are examples of this.
- The federation leaders accepted that they should have a thorough review of any project which comes their way. Projects for survival may inflict long lasting harm to the image and identity of the federation. An example of this is the recent partnership between Muzaffarpur federation and an MFI to channel loan products of the latter. The federation was clueless on its role in facilitating access of its members to loans.

5. Resources for sustainability of Federations

All the federations attributed their inability to keep in regular touch with sanghas and carry out regular activities such as Nari Adalats, EC and GB meetings, to a lack of funds. The EC and GB meetings which were mandatory as per MoA, have become irregular. The federation's reiterated that except few key officials of the EC, other members were finding it difficult to pay from their pocket for travel and other expenses required for attending meetings. Financial resources were the key in making the federations fully functional and alive. The following roadmap was prepared and presented by the federations to address issues related to financial resources:

5.1 Raising resources from membership

- Membership fee - It was suggested that federations needed to workout a plan to initiate collection of membership fees. Various suggestions and apprehensions were placed for discussion. One of the suggestions was to do with the revamping of the existing membership.

The federations suggested the use of existing structures such as representatives at the cluster committee and Unit. This representative should be called for a one day meeting for update on the status of the sanghas.

- Types of membership fee such as one time/life membership fee, annual fee, etc. and payment modes were also discussed. Some of the leaders suggested that a fixed amount could be collected from each member by the sangha, and a certain percentage can go to federation. Another suggestion was to introduce a life membership fee and an annual renewal fee. The federations estimated collection of Rs. 100,000-200,000 depending on the size of the federation. They argued that if only half the sangha members contribute Rs. 25 each, the total amount would come to the figure mentioned above. They said it was a realistic estimation. The outreach of these federations ranges from 7,500-25,000
- Federations will develop a data base on strong, weak and non functional sanghas. Within each category, the number of members who still want to associate with federations should be enlisted. Once the list is ready the EC and GB members should meet them personally to discuss strategies about the revival of sanghas and collection of membership fee.
- This would require realistic and relevant planning by the federation. The women who want to contribute will have questions on the role of federations, relevance to their life and usage of the funds collected through member's contributions.

5.2 Usage of Resources

There were discussions on how to make federations relevant for the member sanghas and for individual members.

- Using physical infrastructure (field centres) for trainings/meetings - Of the six federations, three own their own campuses. The federations of Gaya and Rohtas have spacious field centres in very strategic locations in the district. Some of the members were of the view that these field centres can be developed as training venues and can be given to other like minded organisations to hold their meetings and trainings. Such initiatives would generate some additional funds for the federations.
- A more nuanced plan was prepared by the federations considering the existing status of resources and what was feasible in future as an action plan to augment the availability of resources. The ideas shared by each federation were compiled in the table given below:

Human Resource	Financial resources	Source of future income	Steps to be taken for resource mobilisation
District level governing body	Membership fees	Membership fees	Revival of Sanghas, Inventory of strong Sanghas and individual members, meetings with sangha members and individuals
Meetings with General Body members	Contributions from Resource Teams (5-10% of the fee is given to federation)	Contributions from Resource Teams	Partnership with other organizations
District and Block level Nari Adalat	Collection from Mess	Collection from Mess	Issue based works to create a unique identity as a local women's pressure group
2-3 sangha level leaders earlier in role of Sakhi and or anchors of thematic committees	Application fees from Nari Adalat - In Muzaffarpur 2,68,000/-; in Shivhar 1,15,000/-; and in Sitamarghi 3,00,000	Partnership with Jeevika and UNICEF	Enhance the ability to identify issues according to the situation.

Federation Dialogues in Bihar

Human Resource	Financial resources	Source of future income	Steps to be taken for resource mobilisation
Trainers at village level	APNA Bank, PRATHAM Education Resource Centre	Project fund from government and NGOs	Strengthening Nari Adalats, extend their scope to gender training of adolescent girls and boys. Review and revise fee of Nari Adalats where possible. To make Nari Adalats self-sufficient in terms of income and expenditures
Networks, individuals (NRG members, MS staff, friends in other departments.)			Scale up APNA bank , explore possibilities of more income generating opportunities such as PRATHAM catering contract Link with helpline, Child Line etc

6. Partnerships and Convergence for sustainability of federations

One of the concerns that was expressed by the federations was their limited ability to build and sustain partnerships and network with the government, organisations with similar mandate, bilateral/multi-lateral programmes. Partnerships and collaborations with various stakeholders were considered as key to organisational and financial sustainability. In order to develop shared understanding on the list of organisations that the federations would like to partner and network with, the groups were asked to prepare an inventory of organisations, programmes and individuals. A consolidated list which includes all the stakeholders identified by different groups is given below:

- Police department, Women’s Helpline, Mahila Thanas and Parivar Pramarsk kendras and Special Cell for Women in Police Stations
- SSA - Partnership with schools especially KGBVs
- Women Development Corporation, Social Welfare and Justice Department
- Jeevika – especially VOs for working with the Social Justice Committees
- MGNREGA
- ATMA/NABARD for capacity building support to federations
- Partnership with the office of the Block Development Officer, DALSA and SALSA
- Funding agencies such as - Aga Khan, SISA, UNICEF, Department of Water and Sanitation, PHD, PACS, PSIG, DFID
- Media and other communications channels
- Jagori, CBPS, BPF, NIRANTAR, etc
- MS Societies in other states, federations under MS Societies

While federations are keen to implement the roadmap on resource mobilisation, partnerships and networking the moot issue they faced was how to go about these. The two main factors observed were: Capacity of federation leadership, and resources to implement the action plan. Another factor which may impact their ability in new partnerships and collaboration efforts was their identity as a grassroots local group.