

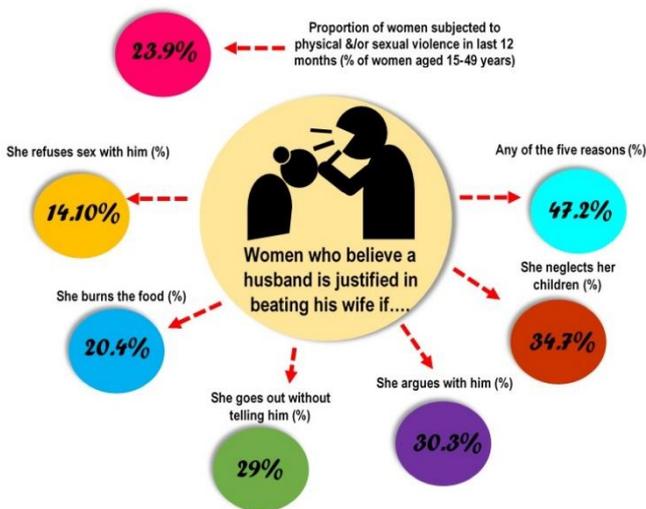
**MS Federations: Walking
together, Forging the Path**

A White Paper

MS Federations: Walking together, Forging the Path

Despite its claims to being the world’s largest democracy and fastest-growing economy, India’s development indicators continue to lag behind not many smaller and resource-poor countries including its South Asian neighbours.¹ India’s claims are called into question most starkly when examined through the lens of women’s rights and gender equality. Universally accepted global gender indicators such as the GDI and GEM reflect **persistent policy failures and blind spots.**

Women’s movements have consistently pointed out that these gaps are **manifestations of deeply-rooted systems of oppression, exclusion and exploitation** based on caste, gender and religious identity that development policies have failed to challenge and confront.



For instance, despite the rhetoric of “inclusive development”, we are confronted today with an explosion of brutal **violence against women, Dalits and minorities.** There is growing evidence of a resurgence in **violent forms of patriarchy and casteism,** fueled by neoliberal economic policies, militarised nationalism and religious fundamentalism.

Transformation in such a situation can come only from informed, organised and determined resistance on the ground. At the same time, the ability of women’s groups to mobilise for action at the local level is being undermined by the “NGOisation” of the women’s question and the aggressive promotion of microcredit as the magic bullet for women’s empowerment.



In this bleak scenario, the rural women’s groups promoted by the Mahila Samakhya (MS) programme stand out as beacons of hope. Far from the media spotlight and academic debates, these women from the poorest and most marginalised communities constitute **a vibrant community of grassroots leaders** committed to creating supportive spaces for other women to find their voice and agency and claim their rights as women, as citizens, as Constitutional rights-holders and as representatives of historically marginalised and excluded communities.

¹ <<http://www.thehindu.com/news/national/india-slips-21-slots-occupy-108th-rank-on-wef-gender-gap-index-2017/article19966894.ece>>

The MS programme is no longer funded by the central government, but is globally recognised for its success in **translating a feminist vision and principles into reality** on the ground. Independent evaluations of the programme have confirmed the impressive positive **social and developmental impacts** of collective action by MS groups. On the one hand, *sanghas*, federated since 2000 at block and district level, have become platforms for women from Dalit, Adivasi and other marginalised communities to stake their **claims to rights and entitlements** in terms of access to education, health services and social welfare programmes.

“There is little doubt that sangha women have developed empowered identities and voices in most MS communities... The signs of success are not necessarily evident in the resolution or elimination of problems that have particularly impacted marginalised women - although several such examples were also identified - but in the contestation of spaces from which these women have been historically excluded and the challenges to discriminatory practices.”

- From the report of the independent evaluation of MS by IIM Ahmedabad

Equally significant in terms of sustaining **long-term agendas of social transformation** are the network of village-level institutions that MS collectives have created. These include *Nari Adalats* (women’s courts) where perpetrators of violence can be brought to justice; *Mahila Shikshan Kendras* (women’s learning centres) that prepare adolescent girls and women to re-engage with mainstream education through rights-focused curricula and feminist pedagogies; and the *Balika Sanghas* (girls’ collectives) a platform for adolescent girls to take collective action on issues such as child marriage and child labour.

The MS Federations are the enduring legacy of the MS programme, and were envisaged as the **institutional framework for long-term support to grassroots institutions** in translating the MS vision of empowerment as transformation. The abrupt cessation of programme funding in 2015-16 disrupted the phased process by which responsibilities were being handed over from district units to Federations. Organisations and individuals associated with MS (including members of the erstwhile National Resource Group) have now formed a loose network (Alliance for MS) to continue support to the Federations in carrying forward the transformatory processes initiated by the programme.

MS Federations today: A snapshot

Table 1: State-wise distribution of MS Federations

	Telangana	Assam	Bihar	Jharkhand	Karnataka	Kerala	Uttarakhand	Total
Federations	43	37	13	35	54	26	19	273
Villages	3627	3466	8482	4993	3701	3715	2925	38,593
Blocks	84	65	124	81	68	18	26	602
Districts	8	12	21	11	18	8	8	111

As a first step to planning a long-term agenda for partnership, the Alliance for MS carried out in 2017 a series of dialogues with MS Federations in Telangana, Karnataka, Bihar, Jharkhand and Assam. Some highlights of the rich conversations that ensued are presented below.

Federations in different states have developed and piloted some **outstanding innovations**.

- MS Federations have set up systems to monitor the **performance of local institutions and service providers** and to hold them to account for gaps and failures. Federations across states bring data from **village-level monitoring** of schools, health centres and *anganwadi* centres carried out by *sanghas*, into discussions with the concerned departments and panchayat committees at the block and district levels. In Assam, Federations have developed a unique methodology for holding district authorities to account. Data on indicators related to SGD targets on women’s empowerment and gender equality is collected through a rapid house-to-house survey by

sanghas. The data is then consolidated, rendered into pictorial form and presented to the public through a “**Data Exhibition**” at the Block headquarters. This becomes a trigger for public advocacy and dialogue with local officials on specific issues and demands of women.

- Federations have also taken on the task of carrying **national campaigns on women’s rights** issues to thousands of villages and households. In almost every state, MS women have spearheaded campaigns on girls’ education, prevention of child marriage, dowry, child labour and different forms of violence against women and children at the village level. Across states, villages where MS *sanghas* are active have been able to ensure girls’ education, eliminate child marriages and child labour, put a stop to traditional rituals like dedication of Dalit girls as *devadasis*, and mobilise communities to challenge caste-based discrimination and humiliating practices. In many cases, MS women have taken up these issues at considerable personal cost. For instance, the decision by *sangha* members to withdraw their children from working in cotton fields involved a significant loss of income and increased burden of work and could not have been taken without a strong political commitment.
- Federations across states have set up economic enterprises based on **sustainable production, collective ownership and profit sharing**, from milk collection and marketing in Karnataka to revival of traditional exchange-based marketing systems for products of household enterprises in Assam. The MS Federation in Muzaffarpur district has set up their own bank (Apna Bank) offering financial services to their members.

MS Federations have consolidated their credibility as **spokespersons for women’s interests** and **advocates for alternative approaches** to development challenges.

- Federations have intervened strongly in public debates and policy discourses to present **alternative approaches on violence** against women and girls. Federations in Bihar and Jharkhand have carried out research on witch-hunting, collecting evidence to show that the practice is a mechanism for enforcing caste subordination and appropriating the resources of single women who dare to challenge established hierarchies. Similar initiatives to change the direction of public discourse have been undertaken in Karnataka around child trafficking and in Kerala on the issue of sexual abuse of girls within the family.
- MS *sanghas* in Telangana have implemented a programme for **collective land-lease and subsistence farming**, defining outcomes not only in terms of increases in individual income but also in terms of larger goals of regeneration of the natural resource economy, reduced reliance on the market and social acceptance of women as farmers. In one mandal for the past twenty years *sanghas* have completely stopped the cultivation of cotton seed as a measure to ensure their children’s education and to end child labour
- The *Nari Adalats* have become widely accepted as a model of a **women-centred and rights-based approach to justice**. MS Federations have partnered with the judiciary in several districts, training paralegal workers to provide counseling and support to women complainants who decide to take their cases to the courts. *Nari Adalats* are now being approached by women from upper castes families, many of whom are willing to pay for their professional services.
- Federations in Karnataka have set up village-level **women’s health centres** specialising in treatment of common ailments and reproductive health complaints using traditional practices and herbal preparations.

These conversations confirmed that MS *sanghas* and Federations had successfully established their identity as an **independent platform for social action** by women from Dalit, Adivasi, OBC and other marginalised communities. Building on this grounded strength, the Federations have a clear political agenda of claiming leadership in the struggle for a world where women and other marginalised and oppressed communities can claim dignity, respect and recognition.

Federations have identified some core strategies that will further this long term agenda. These include challenging and **addressing persistent issues of exclusion and discrimination** that obstruct and deny women's and girls' progress toward empowerment; ensuring **access to basic rights and entitlements** for all women and girls including through **advocacy and engagements with duty-bearers**; **enabling empowerment of girls and in fulfilling their full human development potential**; **challenging, resisting and countering all forms of violence** against women and girls; and accelerating the development of a **strong second generation of women leaders** with competence and commitment to take the struggle forward.

Federations are looking to a wider circle of allies for support in some specific areas.

- **Institutional strengthening** based on a shared vision and perspective, democratic principles and practices, enhanced capacities and a decentralised organisational structure.
- Setting up and managing **alternative spaces** for women such as **hostels** for girls to allow them to pursue higher education; **information hubs** and **drop-in centres** for women and girls who need counselling, advice and support; and **shelter homes** for elderly women who wish to live independently.
- Evolving and **testing alternative feminist approaches** to sustainable livelihoods.
- Capacity-building for intensive **engagement with adolescents** girls and boys to build commitment to gender equality, fostering responsible sexuality and practices, and building the next generation of leaders.
- Capacity-building on new methods of **action-research and evidence-based advocacy**, such as public audits and data exhibitions.

Most of all, MS Federations are seeking to re-establish their **connections with the larger world of feminist thought and women's activism** in and outside the country. These connections were mediated through literally hundreds of people - members of the National Resource Group; individuals and organisations who supported or partnered with MS teams around specific issues; international experts who came in as researchers or evaluators; leaders of other movements; and many committed bureaucrats and officials. The cutting off of funding, the dismantling of the NRG and the closing of the National Office created a break in the exchange of **ideas, experiences and perspectives** that encouraged an **internal culture of learning self-reflexivity and openness to critique**. There is a keen awareness of the weakening of this culture during the years of crisis. Opening up to the wider world is seen as a high priority by all the MS Federations.

Some possibilities for the future

For Allies of MS, the dialogues confirmed the **strength and commitment of Federations**, and their ability to carry the **collective energy, voices and concerns** of the most excluded and oppressed women into **new policy spaces** and **wider arenas of struggle**.

The situation is at a tipping-point – this is the moment to throw our combined weight behind the Federations in their endeavour to reboot their institutional processes, deepen and strengthen their capabilities and gear up to resist and challenge violence, inequality and discrimination in every domain of women's lives.

Some tentative agenda for action in the immediate short term have emerged.

- Follow up on the momentum created through the dialogues, with intensive workshops in at least three or four districts across 4 states to develop a **sharp analysis and critical perspective** on the emerging forms of **violence, exclusion and discrimination** that women are confronting on the ground. This exercise will provide the foundation for a new and coordinated push for gender equality and women's rights in the current social and political context.
- Develop a **strategy and action-plan for supporting federations** in gaining recognition as legitimate representatives of women's voices and interests, claiming a space in policy dialogues at the state level and learning new ways of engagement and advocacy with the state.

- Provide support to existing institutions like *Nari Adalats* and *Kishori Sanghas* to **revisit and strengthen their perspectives** and competencies to carry forward their work while responding to emerging challenges on the ground.
- Facilitate **new alliances and relationships of solidarity** between MS Federations, people's movements and resource organisations at state and national levels.

Allies of MS is presently a loose group of organisations and individuals, for whom the challenge is to set up **flexible, responsive and reliable mechanisms** to sustain **ongoing interaction and dialogue** with Federations and help them in identifying and addressing their **learning and support** needs in specific sectors of action.

MS Federations occupy a unique position in the larger canvas of social action in India today. They represent perhaps the only **autonomous platform for rural women** that is not affiliated to any political parties, NGOs or caste organisations. With their feminism firmly grounded in the **practice of equality, social justice and democracy** in everyday life as much as in public spaces, MS Federations are vehicles for the hopes not only of women's movements but of all movements for social transformation in the country.



“Let’s walk together, and we will make the path...”

- From a song by sangha women from Andhra Pradesh