



Northern Region Workshop on Federation Dialogues
November 28th and 29th, 2017
Patna, Bihar

Report written by *Nishi Malhotra, Mini Mallick and Best Practices Foundation*

Introduction

Federations have emerged only in the last two decades, with the primary agenda of building collectives, but very little has been done towards creating organizational structures which enable their autonomous functioning. There has been no significant attempt to develop their voice at district, and state levels as they have traditionally been dependent on Mahila Samakhya state societies for guidance and functioning. With the withdrawal of the central government's support to the Mahila Samakhya (MS) programme, the institutional building and strengthening processes have been stalled, affecting the ability of federations to operate. The core issue remains that federations were never seen as autonomous by the MS programme, which made them vulnerable to shifting political tides.

The project included teams having intensive field level dialogues with federations, leading to decisions around sustainability and autonomy. It resulted in federations seeing their strength across districts and states and possibly this inspiring them to network independently and start the process of developing voices at different levels.

The workshop was attended by office bearers from 13 federations across three states, namely, Assam (4 federations), Bihar (6 federations) and Jharkhand (3 federations), who represented different districts in each of the states. Besides the office bearers, around 30 federation members were also present for the workshop.

The facilitators for the workshop included the following persons;

Ms Niveditha - ***Center for Budget and Policy Studies***

Ms Dipta and Ms Archana - ***Nirantar***

Ms Sangeetha Purushothaman - ***Best Practices Foundation***

Ms Santosh - ***(former consultant NPO)***

Ms Urmila - ***(former SRP MS Bihar)***

Ms Vandana - ***(former NRG members MS)***

The Federation Dialogues culminated in a workshop, which was held in Patna, Bihar. The key objectives of the workshops were:

- For federations to review their strengths, barriers and possible ways forward
- Enable the women's federations to build a strong solidarity based network of interdependent and self-reliant institutional identity
- Initiate the process of building an inclusive, diverse and broad based solidarity building platform of the women's federations

The workshop aimed at assisting federations to assess their strengths, barriers and possible ways forward. It also acted as a platform to enable the women to build solidarity across districts and states through an independent institutional identity. The federations of the 3 states made presentations of their sustained achievements, challenges and short term action plans after discussion in groups.

The session began with the participants being divided into pairs, and they introduced themselves to each other and then introduced their partner to the larger group. The ice breaker successfully made everyone feel relaxed and comfortable for the activities ahead.

Sharing by the women federation representatives of Bihar

Ms. Vandana began this session by asking the participants to sing a song. Participants from Bihar sang “*Rasta hai lamba bana mandir hai door*”. Ms. Vandana then directed the team towards the main topic and put some questions before the participants. She asked, them what needs to be done to keep the federations active and what are the plans for the future of federations.

Participants talked among themselves under the guidance of Ms Santosh, and Ms Urmila. After intense discussions the Bihar team were ready to articulate their ideas about their federations.



Sharing by the women federation representatives of Assam

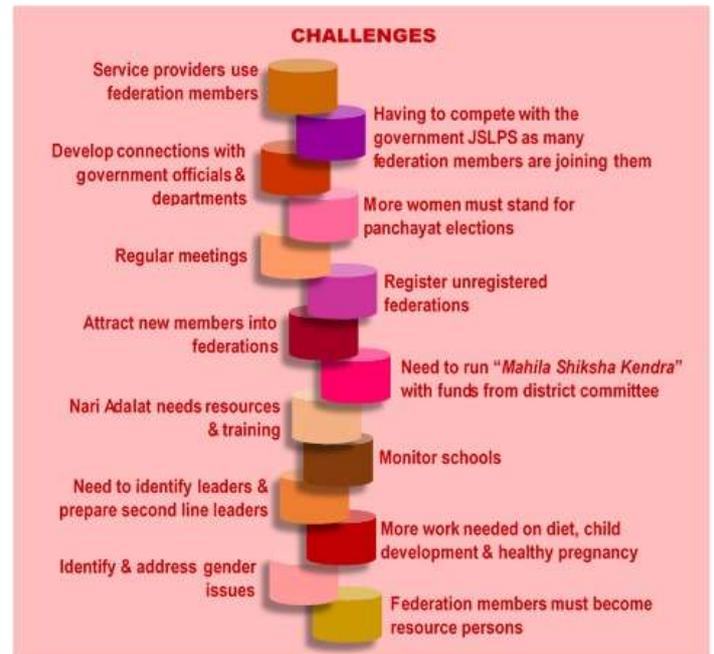
Ms Geeta Rani, the State Programme Director of Assam Mahila Samatha Society, was the link and translator between the participants from Assam and participants from Bihar and Jharkhand. Federation members spoke about their experiences in the field. They talked about adolescent issues, early marriages, income generation activities, data exhibition, methods to make their voice heard in the government departments, among other things. Ms. Alija, Damiyanti, Charu and Anima actively presented their views and ideas to the larger group.





Sharing by the women federation representatives of Jharkhand

Federation members from Jharkhand face an uphill task as their sanghas were geographically scattered. This made communication between members and accessing government plans like Jharkhand State Livelihood Promotion Society (JSLPS) very hard. The women shared that despite the difficulties, they worked diligently under the guidance of Ms. Gloria Purty, District Programme Coordinator, and were able to overcome some of the challenges like bringing the sanghas on to one platform. Parvati, Sunita, Rupa, Rupali, Mecho and Suman spoke and shared their views with everyone.



Broadly, the issues that came forth regarding achievements and challenges from the three states are as follows.

- a) The federations in the three areas are at different levels of maturity and work on issues in the context of their specific regions. The federations in Bihar have a large base, though only 50% of **sanghas** are connected to them. In Assam the federations are at the *panchayat* level so have a higher connectivity with sanghas. And in Jharkhand the sanghas are loosely connected with federations at block level as many sanghas (60%) are still not strong enough.
- b) The structure of federations and their **size** varies. While in Bihar they are district level structures with sangha memberships and cluster level middle level structures, in Assam they are 4 tiered structure from sangha, to panchayat, to cluster to district; and in Jharkhand they are block level structures with sangha memberships.
- c) Even the **strength and maturity** of federations varies across their locations as was evident from their presentations.

Future vision and strategies across states

Groups were created by mixing federation leaders from different states along with people who have been part of the mapping. The themes of the groups were membership, finances and sustainability, capacity building, partnerships, structure, governance and rights based work. Based on these themes, resource persons asked the group questions and gave them some discussion points. The groups were asked to think about how they, as federations, are going to keep their identity with the originality of Mahila Samakhya, considering the changes taking place all around. They were also asked to consider how they were going to mobilise resources and maintain economic independence without the Mahila Samakhya programme to fall back on. They were given some time to reflect on their future vision and strategies for their federations.

All the groups had open interactions, where they exchanged their field experiences. The common points which emerged after the group exercise were the following;

Networking between grassroots level groups should be taken up with messages and information flowing easily and reaching everyone. The women felt that they needed to think further on the economic front. They were also clear that they needed more support on this. Another important point that came out from the group discussions was that anyone who was eligible and had the qualities to lead, should become leaders in the federation. This is the only way the federation will be empowered. The women also felt that they needed to re-think the present structure of the federation. They were unanimous on the importance of the Nari Adalats and that it's functioning must reach women in the most remote areas.

Views and Ideas of Resource persons

Nishi

- There should not be centralised leadership
- Responsibilities should be divided according to women's abilities
- Principles of Mahila Samakhya must stand firm
- The feminist thinking must continue
- Should negotiate with legal clinic to rename Nari Adalat with an interesting name related to women
- Despite many drawbacks we must find alternative options to work

Vandana

- We need to work with single ladies, divorcees, twice married and adolescent girls
- There should be fund collectors among members
- Fake marriages and dowry cases must be handled
- We need to ensure that women in remote areas are able to access the Nari Adalat

Dipta

- Dialogues are going on in other states also, after combining and exploring all the statements we can decide the form and structure of federation
- Will collect the suggestions from different states till March 18, 2018, and then strategise on fund collection
- With the help of Best Practices Foundation, Bhumika and Nirantar we can work on adolescent issues

Gita

- Data exhibition is a strong weapon to negotiate with government officials
- Due to data exhibition, members are able to present their issues with proper proof, to Government officials.

Sangeetha

- Small projects leave a heavy impact
- Economic literacy is very important
- 20 businesses will start in Karnataka and they will provide economic support to the federation.

Santosh

- We have to define the use of membership fee
- We have to confirm the regular meetings

Santwana

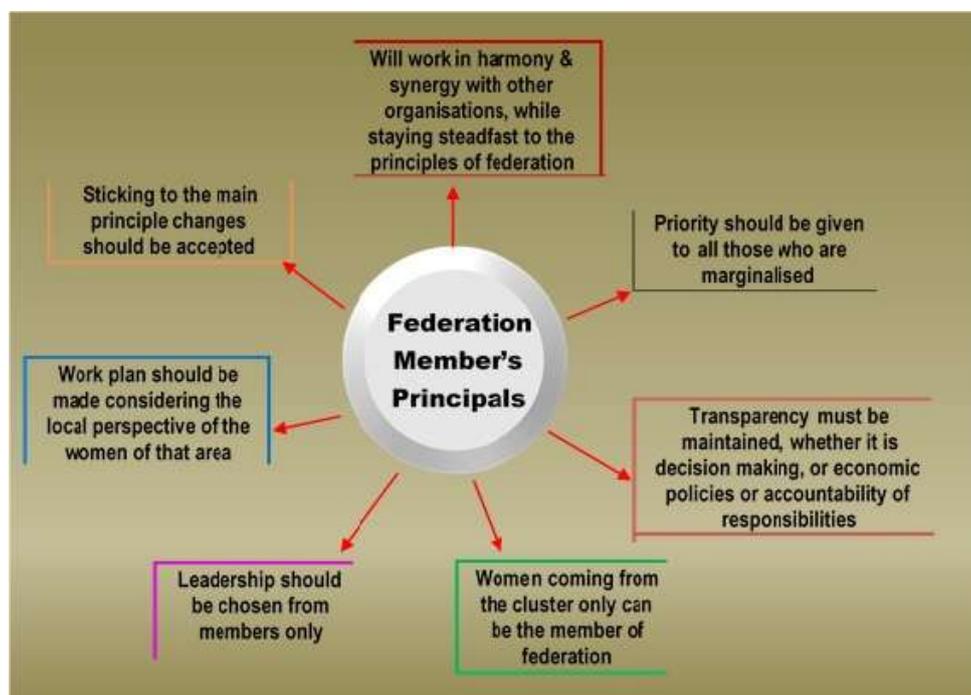
- Nari Adalat has limitations. Federations cannot deal with cases like rape, dowry, etc. but group supports the victim in dealing with the police, filing the case, going to court etc.
- There is a need to have a support system to deal with cases

Archana

- There should be an analytical study on the strength of federation
- The basis of sangha formation should be defined
- All the groups at village level should meet annually
- Mapping of resources is necessary
- Federation members have to find out ways to be active
- There should be accountability, responsibility and transparency in the work process

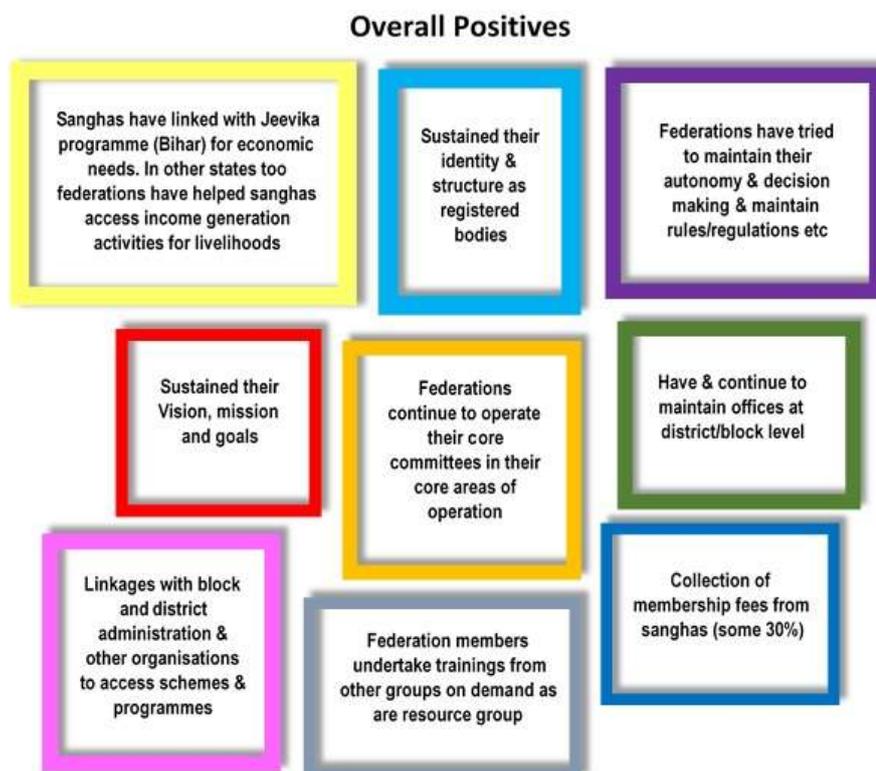
Niveditha

- Federation have strong support from their members, specially emotional support
- It is a good sign that institutions like Kisaan Sakhi, Apna Bank and Nari Adalat still persist
- We have to develop a system to maintain the flow of new information to the sanghas
- Daughters are still not independent
- There must be fixed parameters to include any woman as a federation member
- Resource should be utilised wisely and not get wasted



Action Plan

- Resource like educational trainers, anti-violence trainers, *Panchayati Raj* officials, health workers, gender workers, book keeping, contacts in government departments, help line, counsellors' numbers, etc. are social capital and should be estimated and sourced from within the group.
- There should be complete accountability of economic resources
 - 5% member contribution
 - Funding of project
 - Economic activities of groups
 - Case registration fee
- Will work towards strengthening memberships in sanghas
- Will find ways in which to deal with heinous crime cases that come to the Nari Adalat
- Will work in new fields like "MNREGA Sahayta Kendra" in Jharkhand
- Bihar will support Jharkhand to get their Nari Adalats functioning efficiently
- Will replicate Assam's data exhibition innovation in all federations



Overall Challenges

- a) All federations have been impacted by the withdrawal of the MS programme. Jharkhand and Assam have been adversely effected due to issues of renewal of the MS programme, by the state.
- b) Federations are facing the challenge of a sustained connect with sanghas due to a lack of support mechanisms for review and monitoring, capacity building, linkages, weakening of the base - as many sanghas are not connected to them since regular meetings are not held.

- c) They face issues of leadership and direction too - i) in strong federations it is centralised, ii) in the weaker ones there is not much direction due to lack of guidance and support.

These issues came forth in the presentations and discussions. The team reports have highlighted these more expansively.

Observations

- The federations in Bihar are quite clear on the strategy for going ahead to revive the connection with sanghas and to improve their participations, as a considerable percentage of them are out of the loop of federations at present. Similar is the case with Assam federations. However, the federations in Jharkhand will need to do a lot of ground work to revive the sanghas and equally to strengthen their own capacities.
- Some of the federations clearly need inputs with their own identity, structure and governance, rather than subsist under the shadow of former MS structures.
- They need to be assisted in developing new alliance partners at state and national level to have a state presence as an allied force / network of women's federations.
- They need considerable support and facilitation to strengthen their organisational systems for governance, administration and financial management, documentation, review and monitoring.
- Besides these they require refresher inputs for capacity building on different thematic areas in which they are working at the local level to sharpen their perspectives as well as to prepare for dealing with the changing external environment and its repercussions on women's lives. For this they need specialised inputs from experts.

It is very evident that they are quite capable of sustaining themselves independently in the future after handholding support for a short while – maybe 12 to 18 months. However, in the case of Jharkhand this may take longer as the federation building process has been quite truncated. Since each federation or group of federations is situated differently in terms of local issues and related challenges and strengths etc, inputs will have to be planned accordingly in consultation with them.