

I N T R O D U C I N G

The Mahila Samakhya Movement

Innovations towards
Education for
Empowerment

Grassroots

Women's
Movement



Edited by Sangeetha Purushothaman





A C K N O W L E D G E M E N T

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I N T R O D U C I N G

The Mahila Samakhya Movement

The police questioning a sangha woman about her interference in a brutal rape case in Uttar Pradesh, "On whose support do you take such big cases? I have the authority of my uniform and my government post, to do what I am doing. On what power are you roaming around at ten o'clock in the night on the road?"

She replied, "Do you want to know what power I have? I have the power of 370 villages of Auriya. Do you want to know beyond that? I have the power of 16 districts in Uttar Pradesh. Do you want to know beyond that? I have the power of eight states in India"

A federation and sangha member, Auriya District, Uttar Pradesh

Globally, the last two decades have witnessed the rise of grassroots women's movements everywhere. These movements are largely led by poor women and are characterized by their efforts to challenge and redefine local development, based on their own vast knowledge of solutions that are viable and practical on the ground. These local community-based movements are increasingly known for their innovative solutions to basic survival issues and their ability to tackle issues that affect not only themselves but the entire community. Women leaders challenge and hold local institutions accountable by ensuring that their functioning is transparent and that they address the needs of the community. Grassroots women's movements in India, like the one represented by Mahila Samakhya (MS), are no exception to this larger global trend.



This movement led by marginalised, poor women has created an alternative paradigm of empowerment for a generation of women, men and even the state. This book is a small attempt to bring out

the voice of that movement which through its articulation of rights and collective strength has led to the empowerment of the poorest and most marginalised among women in its real sense. The massive scale and reach of the movement touching more than 8,00,000 women directly in a country as vast and diverse as India, is by itself, a marvel. The sisterhood that this movement has built in each one of these women is based on one identity that they share, that of being a woman.

The multiplicity of issues, the array of activities and the variety of innovations that these women handle, reaffirms the complexity, not only of this movement but also of the life of every poor woman. It thus becomes very difficult to look at this programme with any one lens. Is this a movement about women's rights, or about education, or is it about development? Does it deal with gender justice, or does it impact governance? It is all that and more. In fact, the movement mirrors the inter-relatedness of issues in the lives of women. However, underlying every action is the belief that the empowerment of women is a vital pre-requisite to facilitate their inclusion in development and governance.

Empowerment is a widely debated term and is ascribed a wide variety of definitions in different socio-cultural and political contexts. The discussion on empowerment of women revolves around freedom of choice, control over their own lives, access to, ownership over and control of assets, the right to opportunities and services, the ability to understand, challenge and transform realities of power relations and finally, the ability to influence events and outcomes of their lives. Empowerment as a concept evolved when conventional development approaches sought to include women as targets to increase the effectiveness of outcomes but failed to question the underlying causes of women's dis-empowerment. Thus, the approach to empowerment has made a deliberate and fundamental shift away from the idea of charity to that of entitlement of rights, from the notion of economic empowerment to holistic development. It clearly demands that political, administrative, and social structures guarantee these rights. Thus, women's empowerment extended its scope beyond the individual, to questioning and challenging power relations and inequalities.

Towards this goal, the World Bank's empowerment framework¹ summarises the roles of state institutions, individuals and civil society. It is critical to have state reforms supporting poor, marginalised people's access to information, inclusion,

¹ Narayan D. (Ed.) (2002), *Empowerment and Poverty Reduction: A Source Book*, Washington D.C. World Bank.

participation and social accountability mechanisms. Equally important is to build local organisational capacity where people can solve their own problems. *Local organisational capacity refers to the ability of people to work together, organise themselves, mobilise resources to solve problems of common interest.*² This mobilisation of the community often requires civil society facilitation in terms of strategies to build people's organisations and furthering access to information to solve their own problems.

In India, women's empowerment is an important agenda, and in fact, the explicit stated objective of many state programmes. These mostly constitute poverty alleviation programmes which strive towards the economic empowerment of women. While women are mobilized into collectives through which they access credit, the critique that these collectives do not question underlying gender based power inequalities still holds true. An important caveat to challenging power relations is access to information, as women cannot demand their rights and entitlements unless they are aware of them. Poverty, being a function of lack of access to both resources and information, demands education as the next vital element in the journey towards empowerment.³

The National Policy on Education (NPE) as revised in 1992 was a landmark in the field of education in that it recognized the need to redress traditional gender imbalances in educational access and achievement. This led to the launching of the National Literacy Mission in 1988 to eradicate adult illiteracy in India. Traditional literacy programmes, although well intended, were unable to address the needs of poor women. Programme content, often foreign to their lives was "imposed" on women (UNESCO, 2001) as recipients rather than as change agents or active participants. Moreover, these literacy campaigns gave skills to women as individuals, but seldom encouraged women to critically understand, challenge and transform their reality, possible only through collective action. Thus, though state programmes addressed poverty through women's collectives, or adult literacy through individuals, neither could understand nor deal with empowerment in its true sense. The Mahila Samakhya programme, launched in 1988, in pursuance of the goals of the NPE brought both together through the overarching objective of education for empowerment of women.

The Mahila Samakhya Programme

Education in Mahila Samakhya is understood not merely as

acquiring basic literacy skills but as a process of learning to question, critically analysing issues and problems and seeking solutions. It endeavors to create an environment for women to learn at their own pace, set their own priorities and seek knowledge and information to make informed choices. It seeks to bring about a change in women's perception about themselves and the perception of society in regard to women's "traditional roles". This essentially involves enabling women, especially from socially and economically disadvantaged, and marginalised groups, to address and deal with problems of isolation and lack of self-confidence, oppressive social customs, struggles for survival, all of which inhibit their learning. It is in this process that women become empowered.

Source: Mahila Samakhya, Eleventh Plan Document, Government of India, Ministry of Human Resource Development, 2007, p.3.

For the first time through the MS Programme for Action (1992), education was seen as an empowerment tool and included mobilization, critical thinking, information about rights, and legal literacy. It is implemented in the ten states of Andhra Pradesh, Assam, Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Gujarat, Jharkhand, Karnataka, Kerala, Uttar Pradesh, and Uttarakhand in identified Educationally Backward Blocks (EBB)⁴. Among these blocks, programme expansion was prioritized in areas with higher concentrations of tribal, scheduled caste, and minority populations.

The programme identified several socio-cultural, economic factors that inhibited women's access to knowledge, information, education, mobility and justice; and that these complex factors could not be tackled without the active participation of women themselves. The principal strategy was to ensure this participation through mobilising and organising women into sanghas – a radical departure from conventional educational programmes, at the time. Unlike traditional literacy programmes, learning was led by the women rather than trainers providing inputs. The *Mahila Sangha* provides the space where women can meet, be together, and begin the process of reflecting, asking questions, speaking fearlessly, thinking, analyzing and above all feeling confident to articulate and negotiate their needs through collective action. Thus, the programme emerged as a combination of literacy, mobilization and collective action ultimately leading to empowerment of women. Today a strong, mobilised women's constituency has emerged through 37,000 sanghas and 150 federations across the country. Box 1.1 provides the objectives of Mahila Samakhya⁵.

² *Ibid.* p.17.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ An educationally backward block is defined as a block where the level of rural female literacy is less than the national average and the gender gap is above the national average. http://planipolis.iiep.unesco.org/upload/India/India_NPEGL.pdf

⁵ *Mahila Samakhya, Eleventh Plan, 2007, p.5.*

Box 1.1: The Mahila Samakhya Objectives

- To create an environment in which education can serve the objectives of women’s equality.
- To enhance the self-image and self-confidence of women and thereby enabling them to recognize their contribution to the economy as producers and workers, reinforcing their need for participating in educational programmes.
- To create an environment where women can seek knowledge and information and thereby empower them to play a positive role in their own development and development of society.
- To set in motion circumstances for larger participation of women and girls in formal and non-formal education programmes.
- To provide women and adolescent girls with the necessary support structures and an informal learning environment to create opportunities for education.
- To enable Mahila Sanghas to actively assist and monitor educational activities in the villages – including elementary schools, AE, EGS/AIE centres and other facilities for continuing education.
- To establish a decentralized and participative mode of management, with the decision making powers devolved to the district level and to Mahila Sanghas which in turn will provide the necessary conditions for effective participation.

Source: Mahila Samakhya, Eleventh Plan Document, 2007

MS stands apart from other contemporary development programmes, in that in achieving its goals, it will adhere to certain non-negotiable principles at every stage (Box 1.2). These principles, strongly endorse the philosophy that every action in the programme will be directed by the women, respecting their skills, maintaining a participatory approach and a decentralised, facilitative management. Orienting staff into this philosophy thus

Box 1.2: Philosophy and Principles of MS

- All processes and activities within the programme must be based on respect for women’s existing knowledge, experience and skills.
- Every component and activity within the project must create an environment for learning, help women to experience and affirm their strengths, create time and space for reflection and respect individual uniqueness and variation.
- Women and women’s groups at the village level set the pace, priorities, form and content of all project activities.
- Planning, decision making and evaluation processes, as

becomes vital to the success of the programme. This philosophy⁶ is in turn, consciously embedded into every sangha and every federation.

This philosophical and institutional foundation acts as the base for several practices and innovations shaped by the sangha women themselves. These practices, developed in response to their problems, have had a major impact on individual women, their families, and on the community at large.

Best Practices and Innovations in Mahila Samakhya

This compendium covers best practices from across eight states and attempts to showcase the icons amongst these practices. The final selection of practices include core practices, namely those that are universal across all states as well as innovations which are particular to certain states. The core practices here include the Adult Literacy Programmes, Nari Adalats, Mahila Shikshan Kendras (MSK), and Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalayas (KGBV) while the innovations include the Data Exhibition in Assam and the Panchayat Literacy Programme for Women in Uttarakhand. Federations and sanghas, including kishori sanghas, are the institutional base and have been studied as the main building blocks of the movement.

However, this selection is only a sample from the wide variety of practices across the states. A glimpse of the rich innovations that have emerged over the years across sectors such as health, education, and issues of concern to women are provided below. Several practices have evolved to tackle violence against women. For instance in Uttarakhand, campaigns and awareness camps on the Domestic Violence Act are conducted. Nari Adalats or women’s courts have emerged across many states. Kerala Mahila Samakhya’s “Disha” is a practice intended to tackle dowry and make a block dowry-free with the help of the local government,

- well as all levels of personnel must remain accountable to the collective at the village level.
- All project structures and personnel play facilitative and supportive, rather than directive roles.
- A participatory selection process is followed to ensure that project functionaries at all levels are committed to working among poor women and are free from caste/community prejudices.
- Management structures must be decentralized, with participative decision making and devolution of powers and responsibilities to district, block and village levels.

Source: Mahila Samakhya, Eleventh Plan Document, 2007

⁶ Mahila Samakhya, Eleventh Plan, 2007, p.4.

religious organisations, and the community through continuous campaigns. Additionally, Assam, Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka run counselling centres where women facing domestic problems could seek legal and psychological help. Health based practices like Jasud Kendras in Gujarat act as alternate health centres to address the diseases of women especially relating to reproductive health. Nari Sanjeevani Kendras in Uttar Pradesh are herbal health centres for men and women. Sangha women in Assam cultivate medicinal plants as a measure to conserve soil as well as preserve traditional knowledge of medicine. Thus, a variety of initiatives raise awareness and support women's collective action on social issues.

The federation is the training ground for women leaders to emerge, many of whom then contest and win elections with the support of the sanghas. The Panchayat Literacy Programme in Uttarakhand has taken this political empowerment a step further through focussed training on political participation of women, while the Data Exhibition initiative enhances citizen participation in governance.

Towards economic empowerment, a rights-based approach was predominantly observed in several states where women demand work through the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS) and run the Mid-Day-Meal programmes in schools. Practices like Harithamithram in Kerala, encourages rural communities to engage in vegetable farming in their plots towards the goal of self sufficiency. Economic empowerment practices like group-based micro enterprises in Jharkhand, where sanghas run fisheries, as well as individual income generating activities, like women masons in Bihar, have also evolved. Women masons, first and foremost, challenge gender stereotypes and second, take on projects that primarily benefit rural women, like eco-sanitary toilets, platforms for tube-wells, as flood relief measures.

Gender Education, a cross cutting capacity building strategy for sanghas, has now been extended to other stakeholders in the community in several states. A state-wide practice was launched in Kerala where teachers were sensitised on gender to provide girls an enabling environment in schools and the effort is now to influence the school curriculum. Gender education for men is conducted through campaigns and sessions in Karnataka and with Bala Sanghams in Andhra Pradesh to sensitise boys and girls on gender.

Finally, a range of practices with adolescent girls has also emerged through both informal platforms for action, including campaigns and bridge courses aimed at getting dropout girls back into school, to running mainstream schools like the KGBVs, and providing inputs to the National Programme for Education of

Girls at Elementary Level (NPEGEL) through formal agreements with the State Education Department, to inculcating girls in the rights-based approach of the larger women's movement.

Several problems faced by women are universal and the time has come for these solutions to be shared, understood, and transferred nationally and globally. A comprehensive documentation of every one of those practices within the time frame of a year was not feasible and therefore the study had the difficult task of selecting certain practices to be showcased. The process of selection of practices and reasons for this choice has been described in the methodology section below.

Methodology

Using a participatory, collaborative approach throughout, the study was shaped by MS personnel, researchers and external experts. A combination of methodologies was employed, primarily using a case study approach. Qualitative data collected through field visits, review of documents including reports, training manuals, secondary data, and supplementary materials from nine states informed this study. Quantitative data was collected through formats designed specifically to review trends over the last five years. The entire study was carried out in distinct planned phases: pre-appraisal, preparatory, study implementation and dissemination.



During the **pre-appraisal phase** to short-list practices, Best Practice Assessment Tools were created in collaboration with MS Karnataka and external experts. The study instruments were designed with experts working in the fields of gender, education, policy, governance, community development, and livelihood promotion. These instruments were then tested through pilot studies conducted in Mysore district, Karnataka. This was followed by preliminary visits to nine states to short-list practices which were finalized at a national consultative meeting.

Table 1.1: Practices Documented in 9 states: Ranking and Selection

State	Andhra Pradesh	Assam	Bihar	Gujarat	Jharkhand	Karnataka	Kerala	Uttar Pradesh	Uttarakhand
Federation	■		■		■			■	
Adult Literacy Programme	■	■							■
MSK			■		■		■		
Nari Adalat				■		■		■	
KGBV								■	
Bala Sangham & Kishori Mancha	■	■							
Women in GP (PLP)									■
Data Exhibition		■							
Jagjagi Kendra			■						

■ Main Practice studied ■ Components of a practice studied

Best Practice Assessment Tools (Annexure 1.1, Tables 1.1 and 1.2): Through consultative meetings with researchers and experts, assessment tools were designed to help each state select and rank their practices. These instruments were field-tested in Bangalore with MS Karnataka who helped refine them and finalize the criteria for selection of practices. The criteria for selection included the impact of the practice on education for empowerment of women and girls, the need for documentation of the practice, whether the practice was a mature working model, and was it time tested. The first criteria was disaggregated into four distinct indicators which reflect the most important impacts on empowerment including the increase in (a) mobility (b) access and control over resources (c) decision making capacity and (d) access to gender justice. A weighted average was used for the three criteria namely impact, the need for documentation, and the maturity of the practice (see Annexure 1.1 for definitions of these criteria). After short listing the top three practices, states ranked districts on a scale of 1 to 5 based on the effectiveness of implementation, in order to identify the two top ranking districts for the final study.

Piloting the Methodology and Instruments: A conceptual framework was designed by the team along with instruments for women and girls who were active participants of the various practices, internal stakeholders and external stakeholders. The instruments for five practices (Gender Education for Men and Boys, Kishori Group, Mahila Shikshan Kendra, Nari Adalat, and Saakshar Samakhya Karyakrama) were field tested in Mysore district, Karnataka in November 2009 and research personnel trained on the instruments rigorously. This helped all researchers arrive at a common understanding on the case study methodology, the framework of analysis, the research questions, and each instrument. Five teams, from both Best Practices Foundation and Mahila Samakhya, consisting of a combination of 25 researchers and practitioners from several districts of Karnataka carried out the pilot study. Results of the five pilots

were reviewed by both researchers and practitioners and the instruments were redesigned.

Preliminary visits: Nine MS states were visited by researchers during December 2009 who identified the top three practices from each state and the districts where the practice was most effective. These visits provided an overview of MS activities for all practices, state specific innovations, and processes that needed to be captured during the actual study. During these visits, stakeholders were identified for the top three practices, and related secondary information was collected including state annual reports for the preceding five years, progress reports, studies, and resource materials. Timing of the study was determined based on practice specific processes in collaboration with field practitioners.

Finalizing the practices: At a consultative meeting in January 2010 in Delhi, national and state representatives reviewed the methodological framework and the practices selected. Seven major practices were finally selected to be studied across the country. Additionally, outstanding components of these practices were identified to be studied across states. The research aspects to be studied in depth included the genesis, milestones, the process of evolution over time, strategies employed, impact, challenges faced internally and externally, and finally lessons learnt, specifically for main-streaming and sustainability. Table 1.1 presents the final selection of best practices and components across all states. The final selection was intended to capture a sense of the complexity arising from the cross-cultural setting and the variation in the actual interventions.

Designing the Case-Study methodology including the Results Framework: The findings of the pilot were analysed in January 2010 to refine the conceptual framework and to arrive at the overarching cross-cutting questions for the study (see Annexure 1.2). Detailed instruments were designed for each category of

stakeholder for every practice. Each instrument was refined further with the help of subject-experts and finally in consultation with the respective states where the practices would be studied.

Implementation Phase: During the period of February to July, each state was visited by a team of five to six researchers, often including subject-experts for the select practice. The team spent ten to fourteen days in the field covering two to three districts and the state head office. Researchers interacted with the participants of the programme, community members, members of other village institutions, as well as the field functionaries. A total of 706 women and girls were interviewed individually and in focus group discussions. A total of 334 staff including field staff, districts and state heads were interviewed. Finally 115 external stakeholders including government officials, lawyers, doctors, NGOs, teachers, external trainers, police, local panchayat representatives, youth groups, and family members of the women and girls were interviewed (see Annexure 1.3).

Structured and semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and free interactions helped draw out the impact on individual participants as well as their families and the larger community. Formal sessions with the MS personnel who facilitated the process, helped provide an understanding of the overall vision, strategies implemented, as well as the lessons learnt behind the practices. The most updated quantitative data showing the trends of all practices in that state as well as overall



staffing, coverage and reach of MS was analysed to arrive at the overall national picture. On-going sharing across the research team through intermittent review meetings and with state personnel helped inform the final analysis. Follow-up visits to almost all states, conducted over two to three days from August to October helped clarify and further strengthen the analysis. The final analysis was arrived at only after addressing the critiques from each state and a second set of experts familiar with the

practice and the organization. The last phase included **dissemination** of findings through workshops, and distribution across the states of the final compendium of best practices in November 2010.

The main limitations of the study were determined by the decision to examine the practice in the areas where it was most effective, resulting in the findings not being representative of the practice across the country. The entire study was conducted in a period of a year which limited the time spent in the field. Consequently, several extremely relevant innovations could not be examined and in some states inadequate time was spent. This being a one-time assessment provided only a snap-shot at a moment in time, rather than a longitudinal analysis. The study being primarily qualitative also had its limitations in that it was not supplemented by statistical analysis.

Scope of the Compendium

Although best practices were examined in a state where it resides as an ideal, the case studies of core practices borrow strategies, lessons and impacts from other states, where relevant. The purpose is thus to bring out the best of each practice from across states, as an ideal, which the country can then take forward. A snapshot of the practices in the compendium is provided below:

Federations: As the sanghas matured into strong, independent collectives, they federated to provide women a common forum to raise and resolve social issues at higher levels. The federation, studied primarily in Andhra Pradesh is the building block of the movement that reaches out to women, both within the sanghas and outside, to negotiate health, education, governance, economic and legal issues and helps keep the sanghas unified and alive. Federations also act as intermediaries between the sanghas and the administration, disseminating relevant information, networking with panchayats and government departments, to ensure that women have the information necessary to access their entitlements. Their long term objective is to take the movement forward independently when MS withdraws.

Adult Literacy Programme studied in Assam, has the vision of imparting need based literacy and numeracy, embedded in a holistic framework of education for empowerment. Literacy is imparted through camps followed by Jagrity Kendras which are literacy centres located in the village. The responsibility of running literacy classes is given preferably to a sangha woman, in the absence of whom, another educated woman from the same village is chosen. In addition to using literacy primers, motivational songs, and games, the centres use case stories to demonstrate the ill-effects of illiteracy as part of the teaching

strategy. A distinguishing feature of the Jagrity Kendras, unlike other adult literacy programmes, has been the relevance of learning for women in their daily lives. As a result, more than 60,000 women became literate in Assam alone.

Panchayat Literacy Programme for Women in Uttarakhand promotes women's political participation as elected women representatives (EWRs) in the Panchayati Raj Institutions, as well as citizen participation in the Gram Sabha. It creates awareness among EWRs and the community on the overall Panchayati Raj system, the roles and responsibilities of the elected representatives, provides information on programmes, panchayat finances, and encourages gender equity among Panchayat members. This initiative has brought thousands of sangha women into power expanding their sphere of influence and ability to exercise their rights as citizens in the democratic process.



The Data Exhibition, an innovation of Assam led by the federation, is a powerful planning and monitoring tool. Information is collected through household surveys and exhibited alongside official data in a public place for the benefit of the entire community. Using the Right to Information Act, women obtain access to official data. Representatives of the Panchayats, line departments, and even District Collectors are invited and attend these exhibitions. This compiled data, when exhibited publicly, has increased the information base of women to better negotiate their entitlements and improved transparency of the local bodies. It illustrates the importance of authentic data for implementation and demonstrates the effective participation of the community in governance. The impact has been seen, with the poor and women actually accessing their entitlements as a direct outcome of the Data Exhibition. It is an innovation with enormous potential for community participation in local governance.

The Nari Adalat is an alternative justice forum formed across

caste, marital status, age, religion, region, and occupations which addresses issues of violence against women, and helps women access their rights as citizens. The Nari Adalat studied in Gujarat, provides women a forum that delivers justice which is timely, gender sensitive and affordable, unlike traditional and formal justice forums which could be intimidating, biased against women, and often corrupt. Nari Adalat members resolve cases (domestic violence, divorce, and rape) using a consultative, community based process that is inclusive and builds consensus between both parties, while centre-staging women's needs.

Work with Adolescents MS programme has not left out the adolescents from its ambit; rather it plays an important role in empowering young adolescents through mobilizing them into collectives called **Kishori Sanghas** (also known as **Kishori Groups** or **Kishori Manchas**). To address the issue of



discrimination of girls' access to education MS has established **Mahila Shikshan Kendras** (MSK), residential learning centres, which offer an innovative comprehensive educational programme with a specially designed academic curriculum for drop out and never enrolled girls. Within a short span of eight to eleven months the girls are equipped to exercise their choice about their rights regarding getting back to mainstream schools,

postponing their marriages and joining the labour force. Along the lines of the MSK model, Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) has introduced **Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalayas** (KGBV) since 2004. The KGBVs are a step forward towards providing quality education for classes VI to VIII to girls from minority communities and marginalised families. MS plays a dual role in implementing the KGBV programme; on the one hand MS runs KGBVs in their operational areas; on the other hand it provides quality input in the form of teachers' training and monitoring the programme. Many of the innovations of MS run KGBVs has been adopted by SSA and are introduced in other KGBVs. Although both MSKs

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and KGBVs can cater to a few girls due to their limited capacity, both these institutions have a wider reach in the entire district in terms of spreading the MS philosophy through their alumni.

Kishori Sanghas are located at the other end of the spectrum which organise adolescent girls of a village into a collective in order to create second generation leaders who are gender sensitised and are aware of their rights. Members of the Kishori Sanghas meet regularly to discuss their issues. MS ensures that they receive training on issues such as child rights, prevention of child marriage, and so on. Life skills and vocational exposure further equip them with the confidence and skills to challenge any form of gender discrimination faced in their homes and communities. Taking this initiative a step forward is the **Bala Sangham** which includes adolescent boys.

The **Jagjagi Kendra** is a special innovation encompassing aspects of both MSK and Kishori Sangha. It provides systematic educational input over a longer period of time preparing girls for regular schools. At the same time, being located at the village level, it has a strong linkage with the sangha which together enables them to challenge patriarchy. The compendium provides a comparative analysis of MSK, KGBV, Kishori Mancha, Bala Sangham and Jagjagi Kendra initiatives studied across six states.



A detailed, qualitative examination follows for select practices of the enormous work done by the programme, which envisages a society free of gender inequalities and gender based social evils and barriers. Using a case study approach the process, strategies, impact, and lessons learnt are examined for each practice. Each of these institutions, practices and strategies,



although examined in separate chapters, are closely intertwined and together contribute to the overall objective, namely that of empowerment.⁷ Each practice is a powerful reminder of the potential hidden within these women, who have chosen to transform reality and create a new space, where poor marginalised women can participate effectively in all spheres.

⁷ For details on each of these strategies referred to throughout the compendium please see Annexure 1.4.

C O N T A C T



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F E D E R A T I O N S

The Face of the Movement

Introduction

The Mahila Samakhya programme's focus on collectives was a radical departure from the usual focus on the individual as the beneficiary of most education programmes. The program, focusing on poor rural women, sought to enable them to examine and challenge the roots of their marginalisation, possible only through group solidarity and support. Today, of course, the significance of groups and collectives has been established as an effective strategy used to ensure women's empowerment.



The *Mahila Sangha*, a collective of 30 to 50 women constituted at the village level (referred to as "sangham" in Andhra Pradesh and as "samoo" in Bihar) is the nodal point of all activities within MS. Over the years, the sanghas have become vibrant, empowered groups at the village level, with their influence seeping through a wide variety of development initiatives of the community. Now, the sanghas have expanded their spheres of activity and influence, beyond just a single village, through federations at the block and district levels. These federations look at women's and girls' concerns as issues that require a broad based movement approach, to reach and change the wider social environment. (Jandhyala, 2003). Autonomous federations and sanghas are the building blocks of this grassroots movement which provide the basis for women to work together on social issues, ensure a learning environment and at the same time respond to an ever-changing socio-political milieu.¹



"MS federations focus on social change in a broad sense. It embodies the struggle for a more humane and gender-just society propelled by the agency and the leadership of marginalised women. In this struggle, they challenge and overcome barriers of various kinds – social, cultural, and systemic. Such organisations have typically been located in urban areas led by educated, upper class or caste women. The MS federations are turning this process on its head and laying the ground for a more grassroot level women's movement around gender issues." (Jandhyala², 2010)

Federations that have evolved out of the MS programme are, therefore, different from other collective structures in their processes, perspectives, and objectives. Unlike contemporary structures that look at empowerment only through the lens of poverty alleviation and economic empowerment, these federations have a broad based, multi-faceted, and radical consciousness-raising approach imbibed from MS. (Batiwala, 2007).

"SHGs are different from MS sanghas. MS is more important. It has nothing to do with money, but more with thinking and knowledge."

Narsamma, Federation member in Andhra Pradesh

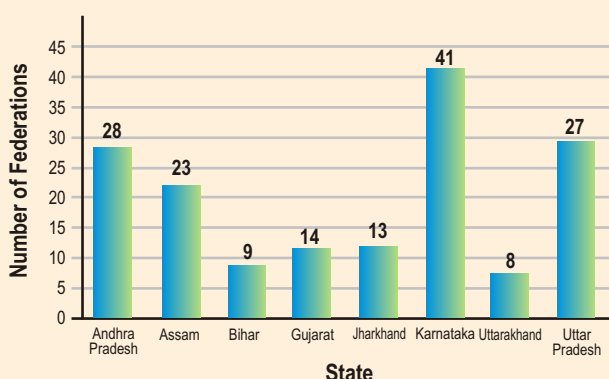
Source: The MS Dialogues, 2009, Report on Refresher Workshops for MS Teams, Educational Resources Unit, New Delhi.

The MS programme is currently operational in 83 districts in 339 blocks in nine states with close to 8,00,000 women mobilized in the sanghas and federations. Nationally, there are about 150 federations across the states with Karnataka having the highest

¹ Mahila Samakhya, Eleventh Plan Document, Government of India, Ministry of Human Resource Development, 2007.

² Correspondence with Kameshwari Jandhyala, First Director of Mahila Samakhya Andhra Pradesh and Consultant to the National Office of Mahila Samakhya in Department of Education, GOI in October 2010.

Chart 2.1: **Number of Federations by State**



number followed closely by Andhra Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh (Chart 2.1).

This compendium highlights the important features of federations viewing them as the basic institutional architecture for all women’s initiatives in the movement and not as a best practice per se. Autonomous federations in Andhra Pradesh are examined in detail, while certain features of federations in Bihar and Jharkhand are also highlighted. Mahila Samakhya came into existence in Andhra Pradesh in 1993. At present, Andhra Pradesh Mahila Samatha Society (APMSS) is working in 3,638 villages in 96 mandals (blocks), catering to 1,26,169 women of 14 districts.³ To date, there are a total of 28 registered federations at mandal level in five districts of Andhra Pradesh, of which 21 have become autonomous. The Bihar Mahila Samakhya Society (BMSS) which began in 1992 works in 5,574 villages in 71 blocks, catering to 1,14,471 women of 13 districts.⁴ In Bihar, there are nine district level federations, of which six are registered.

Methodology

The current study was conducted across three states of Andhra Pradesh, Bihar and Jharkhand with field visits to six districts. The team visited the districts of Warangal, Karimnagar and Medak in Andhra Pradesh, the districts of Sitamarhi and Muzaffarpur in Bihar, and Saraikeela district in Jharkhand. Focus group discussions held with over 180 federation women and interviews with 21 external stakeholders informed this study. Additionally, close to 100 MS staff from district and state offices, were interviewed to understand the genesis, the process, and the inputs that they provide to create and strengthen federations. The focus group discussions brought to light the dynamics of the federations, activities, and achievements, further supplemented by secondary data analysis of MS Annual reports and other

documents. External stakeholders, like government officials, panchayat members and NGO representatives were interviewed to obtain an external perspective on the usefulness of the MS federations in their interactions with them.

Since this compendium on best practices aims at providing insights into the processes and impact of the federation, it is mostly derived from studying those federations where the impact was most visible. This poses some limitations in being able to generalise findings across states or federations (see methodology section in the Introduction). Instead, the study showcases the icons among federations demonstrating the potential for all others to aspire towards and highlighting the factors that enabled these icons to emerge.

What is a Federation?

Andhra Pradesh Mahila Samatha Society (APMSS) defines a federation as, “a confederation of all village level sanghas at mandal (block) level.” The federation is a forum where marginalised women organise themselves to confront and transform social and economic arrangements and cultural systems that subjugated them. (Batiwala, 2007) Their functions include, acting as an intermediary between the sanghas and the state administration, disseminating information, networking with panchayats and government departments, providing inputs to sanghas on health, education, governance and legal issues, providing opportunities for income generation to sanghas, and enabling sanghas to sustain and stay bonded with each other. (Das, 2004)

The Need for Women’s Federations

Sanghas realised that if they were to be self-reliant, independent, and if their achievements in social and gender equity was not to be lost over time, they needed to federate at higher levels.⁵ Women were oppressed and disempowered because of deep rooted gender biases. Marginalised, rural women did not have access to rights, information, resources and lacked a platform to address their issues. Lack of recognition as active participants in societal structures reaffirmed the secondary status of women in the community. Thus, it became apparent that village level sanghas had to be federated for greater collective strength and bargaining power to take the movement forward, especially when MS withdraws.

Federations thus evolved as a structured platform with the overall mandate of women’s empowerment. In the year 2001, the federations formulated their vision and mission.⁶

3 APMSS Annual Report 2008-09.
4 BMSS Annual Report 2008-09.

5 APMSS Annual Report 1998-99, p.16.
6 Journey from Sangham to Federation, APMSS.

Vision

A society where women have dignity, recognition and value together with social, economical and political equality

Mission

- To reach out to all women in the village
- To respond to issues of women’s concern
- To influence desirable social change by acting as a pressure group
- To reduce social inequalities and gender discrimination both within the family and society
- To improve womens’ literacy and girls’ education through focused campaigns and action
- To empower the second generation by transferring knowledge and information
- To converge and network with government and non-government organisations
- To increase women’s participation in local governance
- To support elected women representatives in order to influence micro-level planning
- To demand for women friendly policies and planning

Source: Vision workshop with Andhra Pradesh federations, Hyderabad, 2001

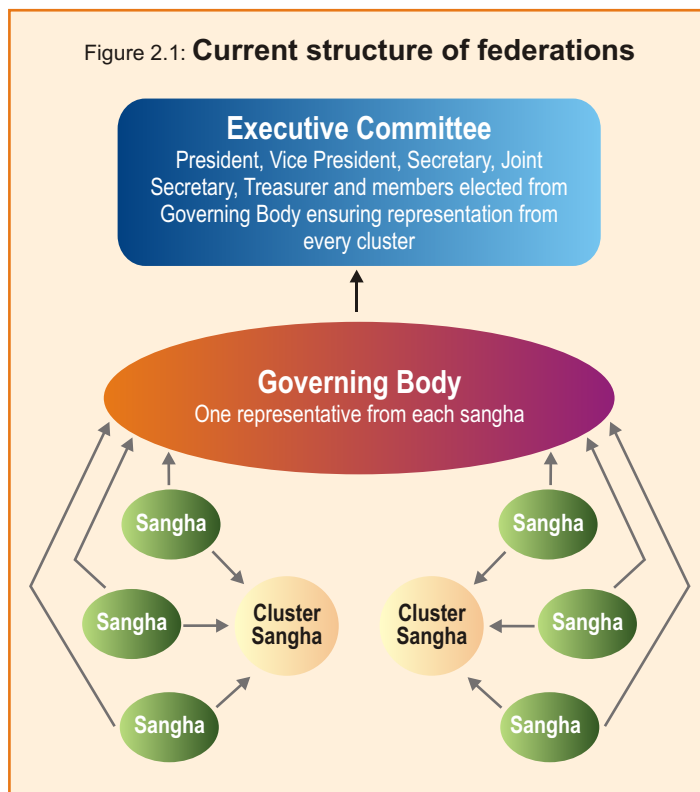
In Bihar also, the federation has been formed with similar objectives but includes economic self-sufficiency and self-employment of women.

Structure

Since issues are interrelated in the lives of poor women, the federation structure has to be flexible enough to respond to their multiple needs - (Purushothaman, 2003). Such a structure, typically complex in function and form can only evolve over time. Historically, issue based federations have been formed on the basis of an issue or a particular cause and once the cause is addressed, these federations tend to dissolve. In contrast, MS federations enable a participatory process of change and functioning that can address any issue that comes its way.

Figure 2.1 represents the current structure of the federation in Andhra Pradesh which has representation from both cluster and sangha levels. Two to five women represent each village sangha at the cluster level, thus forming a cluster level sangham. Cluster representation is rotated among members, such that there is a mix of experienced and new members. At the same time, one member from every village is elected as a governing body member to represent the village sangha in the mandal federation. ⁷At the

Figure 2.1: Current structure of federations



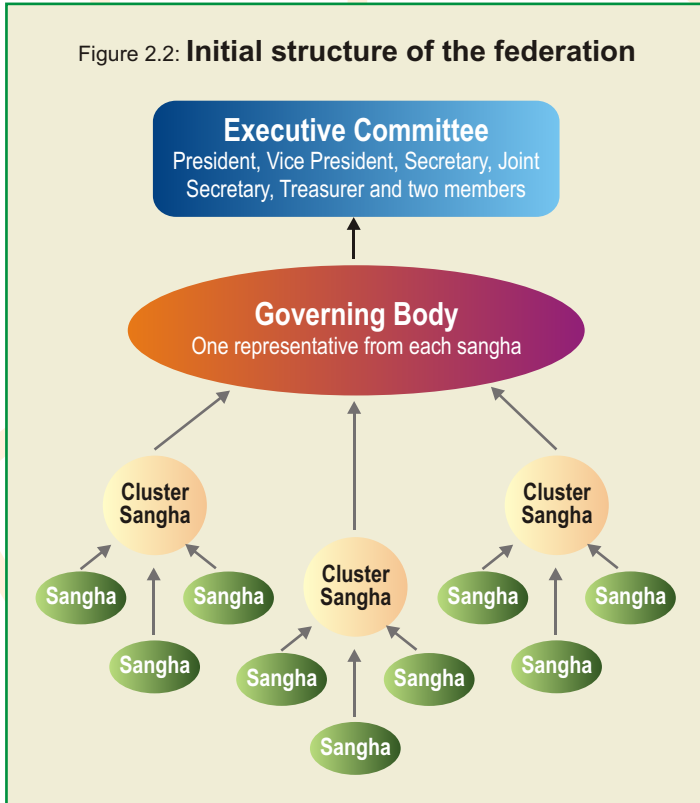
general body block meeting once in two years women from all sanghas elect the governing body members. From this governing body, the Executive Committee is selected. There are nine to fourteen clusters per mandal federation, each of which is represented by a member in the executive committee. The governing body and the Executive Committee are elected such that at least two-thirds of the members in the governing body are changed. The new Executive Committee is formed six months before completion of the term, a learning period for the new committee to be inducted and trained along with the existing committee. The office bearer positions in the Executive Committee include a president, vice-president, secretary, joint secretary and treasurer. The size and tenure of the Executive Committee varies across states (one year to a maximum of three years).

However, these structures were not developed overnight, but over a series of iterations.⁸ The tenure of the Executive Committee was changed from one year to two, to ensure experience is not lost. Initially, the governing body was formed with representation from the cluster alone (Figure 2.2). As the women realised that information needed to flow directly to the sangha and back, the current structure evolved. Direct representation from the sangha

⁷ Similarly in Bihar, *samoohs* from ten villages constitute one *sankool* (equivalent to the cluster level federation in AP), and five such *sankools* constitute one unit (equivalent to the block level) which is then confederated at the district level to form the district federation. There is a Unit level Sanchalan Samiti which is the executing arm of the federation. Two women from each

village are selected to form the Aam Sabha (akin to the governing body) at the district level from which the Executive Committee is chosen.
⁸ APMS, 2000-01 Annual Report, p. 8-9 shows different proposed structures from different blocks in Andhra Pradesh.

Figure 2.2: Initial structure of the federation



to the federation governing body ensures that a hierarchical mode of conduct does not emerge, makes sure that sanghas' issues are represented in the federation and maintains accountability to

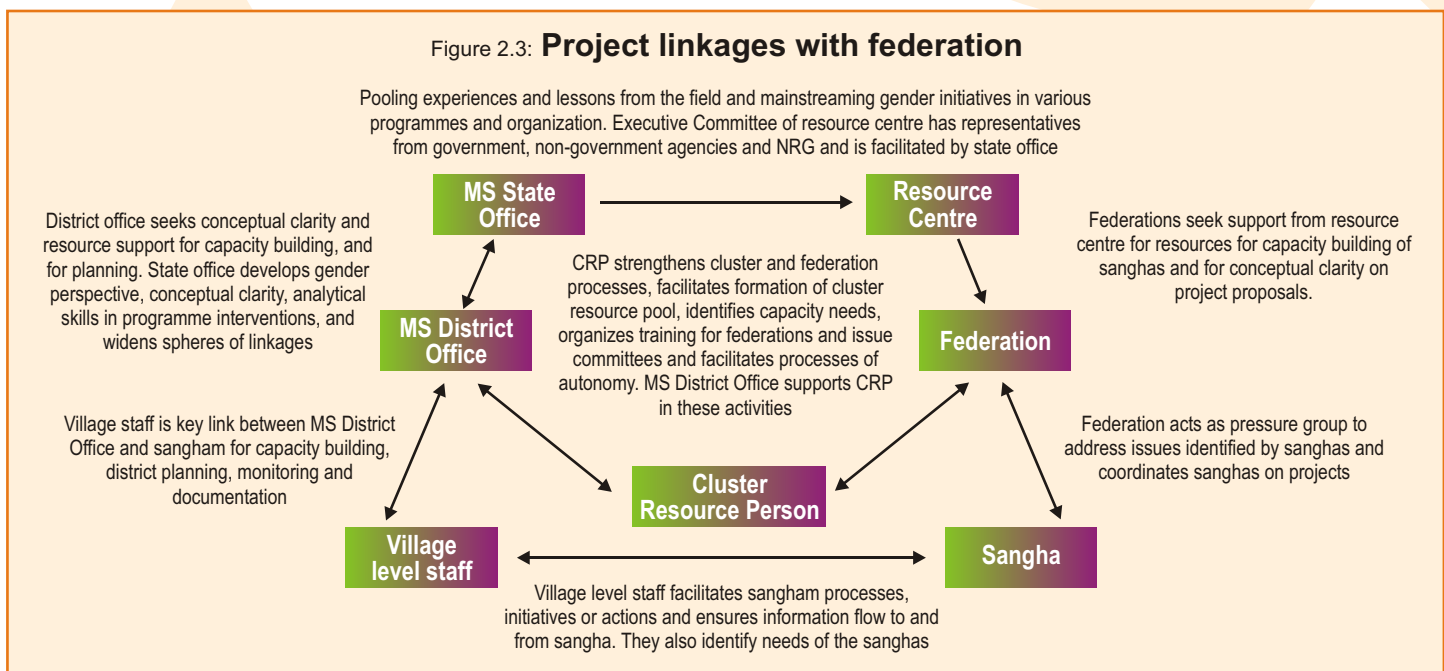
the sangha. Thus, this role of the governing body member becomes crucial for a decentralised and democratic functioning of the federation.

The federation structure is supported by several levels of organisation within MS, each of which has a distinct function (Figure 2.3). Broadly, the state and national offices provide resource and policy support respectively while the district, cluster, and village level structures provide operational support in building and supporting the federation through capacity building, monitoring, on-going guidance, and documentation. As part of its withdrawal strategy, MS has also begun building a series of resource groups at various levels such as the State Resource Centre to provide a knowledge building base, the Mandal Resource Group to build trainers within the federation, and plans to build a District Resource Group to act as an advisory body with experts from other NGOs, MS offices, and federations.

Building the Federation

What distinguishes the MS programme design from conventional development approaches is the absence of pre-determined targets, or service delivery mechanisms. Instead, the explicit focus is to empower women to mobilize, identify issues, raise their voices, and challenge existing development norms – epitomizing a rights-based approach. This, in turn, is reflected in the vision, mission, and functions of the federation, how their collective identity is built, the institutional arrangements, and the philosophical underpinnings.

Figure 2.3: Project linkages with federation



Building a Collective Identity

Individual to Sangha

The sangha is the foundation of the federation, where women build their own identity as change agents and, a sense of sisterhood to support each other. In the process of building these collectives, the sahayogini, the village field organiser, plays an important role in facilitating critical thinking and reflection among women on their own lives. The cadre of local facilitators have an in-depth understanding of gender issues, how the local context shapes those issues, and how to respond sensitively to them. APMSS articulated four stages in sangha formation as rapport building by staff, creation of small groups, consolidation and their independence.⁹

For the women, just meeting together, is an act of empowerment where they realize that other women also face similar issues. Instead of the often heard approach, “this is our fate, and we have to suffer it”,¹⁰ this alternative space encourages them to challenge patriarchal norms and practices. In the sanghas, women begin the process of reflecting, asking questions, speaking fearlessly, and analyzing issues. With this emphasis on processes, rather than a mechanical set of targets, the sanghas take their first steps towards challenging local power structures through the strength of their collective. Initially, women discuss and act to meet practical needs like maternity assistance, street lights, ration cards, and pensions. In due course, with raised awareness through these meetings, women are able to identify violence in their lives, and together challenge and resist it.

Sanghas are equipped with knowledge and skills on health, social forestry, environment, panchayati raj systems for which a core of self-reliant women is developed in each village. Sangha women determine their needs based on their context. For instance,

Box 2.1: Initial impact of sanghas in Andhra Pradesh

In Andhra Pradesh, sanghas identified health as a serious problem in 1993-94. Several inputs on health were imparted in cluster meetings and workshops. This, in turn, had impacts at several levels in different places. About 600 children were immunized in two districts, 75 percent of the sanghams negotiated with Auxiliary Nurse Midwives to ensure regular visits. The women also got the panchayat to chlorinate drinking water sources and 800 women applied for schemes to construct latrines, all within the very first year of forming the sanghas!

Source: *The Learning Process, Andhra Pradesh Annual report, APMSS, 1995*

initially, women in Andhra Pradesh felt that their major concerns were health, access to water, and literacy and training was conducted to meet these needs (Box 2.1). The core objective of capacity building is to create an awareness of their rights, while

Box 2.2: Parameters indicating strength of the sangha, Andhra Pradesh

- A strong collective identity
- An ability to identify issues and take up struggles, even if it meant conflict with men and the community
- An ability to access information
- Having a strong woman-centred perspective
- Capable of independent decision making
- Strong leadership
- Has established linkages with village level institutions
- Capable of networking and harnessing support from other sanghams.

Source: *Report on National Workshop on decentralization (30 July-7 August 1997), APMSS, (1997).*

the regular meetings and discussions, help women build a collective identity. Gradually, women start questioning the deeply embedded practices of a patriarchal society like child marriage, dowry harassment, and domestic violence. Further, sanghas start to collaborate and act as pressure groups for several issues. To give some direction towards autonomy of sanghas, indicators



Bejjanki Federation EC members conducting Sangha meeting in Karimnagar District, AP

of strength were formulated in Andhra Pradesh (Box 2.2). Strong sanghas were those that acquired a social space and status while weak sanghas were those with fragile bonding between members and, therefore, limited effectiveness. These indicators changed as the programme evolved. In Bihar, a similar 20 point evaluation matrix developed where the impact of the sangha for every issue is measured (Annexure 2.1). The most important outcome of

9 APMSS Annual Report 1996-97, p.24.

10 Interview with Vijay Rekha in Medak, Andhra Pradesh, March 2010.

sangha formation is the collective identity developed among women where a non-traditional space is born.

Sangha to Federation

As the collectives gain strength, the need to influence change at higher levels emerges and the federation is the natural response. The federation is also the forum where sanghas prioritize and represent issues through a democratic process and initiate collective action. In both states, the initial discussions to form federations were mainly conducted with the strong sanghas.¹¹ In Andhra Pradesh, if about 80 percent of the sanghas are assessed to be strong, then the withdrawal process is initiated and all sanghas in the mandal are federated. Initially, in the older districts Bihar followed a different strategy where only the strong samoohs were included however in the new districts all the samoohs are federated.

In Andhra Pradesh discussions commenced in 1998 on the structure and role of the federation. In these discussions, the sangha women decided that a federation at the mandal level could act as a pressure group to facilitate change, and as a

Box 2.3: Social agenda of federations, as visualized by members in 2001

- Strengthen their capacities and build up skills
- Develop their literacy and numerical skills
- Able to access information and resources at various levels
- Resolve issues with a gender sensitive outlook
- Take up the cause of social issues
- Take up economic activities
- Equipped with information on legal rights
- Start MSK and old age homes at mandal level
- Set up information centres
- Generate awareness on the importance of child and adult education
- Enable formation of *cheli sanghams*
- Converge with various government departments and other institutions.

Source: APMSS, Annual Report, 2000-01

resource group on health, education, and gender to raise consciousness on a wider scale. MS facilitated institution building processes for members, conducted capacity building activities on federation management, and helped develop by laws. The focus on rights and entitlements was sustained through continuous legal literacy, educating women on Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act (2005), Child Marriage Restraint Act

(1929), Right to Information Act (2005), Marriage Registration Act (2007), property rights, as well as awareness on government programmes.

Thus, in Andhra Pradesh, in the year 2000, in the districts of Medak and Mehboobnagar, the first mandal level federations were formally registered. A vision workshop with members from these newly registered federations was held in 2001, where the members themselves visualised an ideal federation and put forth their social agenda (Box 2.3). By 2005, many more federations were registered. In 2006, MS initiated the process of roll back and by 2010, 24 federations were officially declared to be autonomous. A systematic process is followed for facilitating autonomy and is explained later. Box 2.4 outlines the milestones of the federations in their journey from sangha to federation in Andhra Pradesh

Box 2.4: Outline of milestones of federations in Andhra Pradesh

- 1993** Discussions on situation of women in six select mandals of Medak and Mehboobnagar districts are conducted.
- 1994-96** Women’s collectives or sanghas are formed and spread across mandals
- 1997** Cluster sanghas are formed and discussions on mandal level confederation happen
- 1998** Strong sanghas accelerate their journey towards autonomy, and focused discussions on structures in the process of decentralization help develop clarity
- 1999** Strong sanghas get ready to confederate at mandal level, and extensive discussions on roles and responsibilities at sangha and organisational levels and institutional systems happen
- 2000** Executive Committees form in older mandals and efforts result in registration of Makthal and Pulkal federations. Federation committee members facilitate cluster meetings signifying a role change. Federations organise mandal level melas on child labour and demand accountability from officials.
- 2001** Indicators for an ideal federation are developed and training needs identified. The idea of a federation fund emerges where each sangha contributes. First federation meeting in Adilabad district is independently organized by sanghas. Medak district administration approaches federation for legal literacy and health training to SHGs. Federations initiate the Mahila court. More federations are registered.

11 APMSS Annual Report 1998-99, p.16.

2002 General body meetings and mandal level *melas* are held for the sustainability of the federations. Few more changes in the structures and processes of federation are made. Efforts for offices for the federation and cluster huts are made and Andole federation obtains a plot for its office.

2003 In older federations rotation of executive committee members is implemented. Federation participates actively in programme expansion in new areas. Pulkal and Andole federations take up Mahila Shikshan Kendras' management. More federations are registered.

2004 Women begin to share their expertise as resource persons for programme expansion in new districts and mandals. Maganur federation manages Residential Bridge Courses. More federations are registered.

2005 Federation process accelerated in five districts. Annual general body meetings and discussions on auditing and reporting in the registered federations take place to formalize systems. State level vision workshop held towards sustainable growth and empowerment of federations

2006 First federation office is established in Andole mandal. Mandal specific issues are identified. Federations conduct pre-election voter awareness campaign for more participation of women in Panchayat elections. MS initiates the process of rollback at field levels, and prepares for autonomy of federations.

2007 Change in MS role in areas where federations are ready to be autonomous. Capacity building on institution building and identification of resource group is done. Four federations in Andole, Pulkal, Makthal and Utkoor mandals become autonomous.

2008 Eight more federations become autonomous. Cluster organizer¹² strategy is adopted.

2009 National workshop held with federation and MS representatives from different states to envision the federation road map

2010 A total of 21 federations are declared autonomous.

Source: *Journey from Sangham to Federation, Document from APMSS*

Institution Building

The process of building the federation has evolved through a series of events that both reflected on the needs of sanghas and federations, and helped them envision the way ahead. These events were instrumental in sharing lessons across federations and in building clarity among themselves. Building the federation as an organisation begins by clearly outlining its objectives, by laws, and ways of working. The institutions are built by women setting their own agendas, meeting regularly, minuting these

meetings, creating and executing their action plans. Both in terms of financial management and operations, transparency and proper management of the funds through regular auditing and accounting, and reporting to the constituency is built into the federation process.

Federation Management

Like any start up organisation, the federation needs to develop its institutional systems to sustain itself. However, unlike other organisations, run by literate, professional personnel with managerial experience, these federations are run by poor rural women, who are seldom literate, have no experience in managing organisations, and have never operated in a structured environment. Therefore, these processes and capacities need to be built.



Sanghas involved in construction of cluster hut in Medak District of AP

■ Creation of a Formal Identity as a Registered Society

As federations gain confidence in their ability to manage themselves as institutions, they are registered as formal bodies under the Societies Registration Act (1860). They select names such as “*Swatantra Bharata Mahila Sangham*” and “*Jyothi Mahila Samakhya*”. They also frame the vision of an ideal federation and continue to work towards the goals that they have set for themselves. They also decide on dates for meeting. For instance, in Andhra Pradesh, Medak district, the federation governing body meets on 28th of every month to plan and review its activities.

■ Resource Mobilisation and Management

As an institution, the federations also need to make arrangements for their financial, human resource and infra structural arrangements.

Financial Management: The federations currently have different sources of finance for their activities and are focussed on building the corpus. Their consistent source of income is the contribution from the sanghas. Currently, sanghas pay

12 Cluster Organiser strategy is explained in the section titled “Autonomy”.

around 20 to 50 rupees per month as contribution in Andhra Pradesh and Bihar. Federations run different funded projects like managing the Mahila Shikshan Kendras (MSKs), conducting enrollment campaigns and sanitation projects. Details of these projects are given in a later section. Federation members also become resource persons for other NGOs and contribute a part of their remuneration to the federation fund. In Bihar, when federation members get Mid Day Meal or other catering contracts, they contribute a part of the profits to the federation fund. Similarly, when federations host exposure visits for outside agencies, they charge learning fees. As a registered organisation, the federation also conducts internal and external audits and files returns. In most cases, they hire a chartered accountant to make sure that compliance is adhered to.

Human Resources: Depending on their projects, they also appoint people to manage activities. If they don't have literate women with accounting capacities, they appoint accountants. All these decisions are taken after due agreement from the governing body. For example when the Andole federation had to manage several projects, they recruited an administrator.¹³

Infrastructure: For a long time, the federations held monthly meetings in different community, government, and public places. As they formalised their systems, it became important to have an office. Seeing their enthusiasm and work, government sanctioned land for their offices. In Andole mandal, the Andhra Pradesh Mandal Rural Development Office allotted land for their office. They used money pooled from sanghas for the materials, recruited a mason, and contributed their labour, on rotation to build their own federation office. Today, the federation offices have been built not just with brick and mortar but with their own labour, time and money, a testimony to the value that they attribute to their larger collective.



Federation meeting in Medak District of AP

■ Planning and Monitoring

Planning and monitoring is an ongoing function of the federation, which systematises federation activities which happens at the levels of the sangha, cluster and governing body. The sangha discusses issues and decides on what is to be taken to the governing body. At an annual planning event, issues from the sanghas are tabled by the governing body member in the federation, for which action plans are drawn and committees appointed. For instance, in 2001, the Narva Federation in Andhra Pradesh decided to work on four issues namely child marriage, *jogini* initiation, health, and AIDS.¹⁴ The executive committee of the federation holds a meeting in December to start the planning process from sanghas, and then from January until March, sanghas prepare pictorial charts to present to the clusters and mandal federations.

The monitoring function of the federations encompasses ensuring overall sangha operation, overseeing the Mahila Court activities,



HSB Federation strengthening all Sanga meeting in Karimnagar District, AP

and needs assessment with MS. The federation monitors sanghas on regularity of meetings, membership, cases of the legal committee, repayment of loans, projects, and other issues which need to be addressed. In Medak district in Andhra Pradesh, the Mahila Court has its meeting on 8th of every month and reports to the federation on 28th during the federation meeting. MS conducts a monthly review meeting where two members from the executive committee participate and raise issues where they need help.

Embedding MS Philosophy in the Federation

The MS philosophy (Box 1.2 in the Introduction) of building decentralised, facilitative structures with participative decision making and devolution of powers to the sangha is what makes these federations stand apart. Embedding the original philosophy

13 APMS Annual Report 2006-2007, p. 15-16.

14 APMS Annual Report 2001-02, p. 4.

into operational principles is a non-negotiable component of the institution building process. (Box 2.5)¹⁵ This begins with the orientation of the sahayoginis in MS right up to the every day functions of the federations.¹⁶

Box 2.5: Translating MS principles into action

- Strong belief that women are an embodiment of knowledge and experience and this existing base will inform all processes and activities of the movement. Women are instrumental in the planning and in the design of solutions to their problems
- Design of training sessions use case stories, role plays, and exercises based on real life stories of sangha women rather than through a theoretical transfer session or through the type of training that assumes that participants do not know.
- Agenda, issues and decisions are made by the women themselves ensuring participation and ownership of the sangha
- MS functionaries are accountable to the community in which they work.
- Rigorous training is given to the functionaries to develop their understanding of education as a process of critical thinking and to build their own capacities to transfer this analytical process to the sanghas.

Source: Interviews with MS state and district staff, Andhra Pradesh in March and August 2010

Participatory decision making is a distinguishing factor of the MS federations where the sanghas play a central role. To begin with, the timing of the meetings and the agenda of issues discussed, are based on the inputs from the sanghas. The wide variety of issues raised by women in different states is clear evidence that the federations do not have one particular cause or agenda. Rather they stand for whichever issue is important to the local sanghas. This reflects in different issue based committees across states. For instance, Andhra Pradesh has a natural resource and asset building committee while Bihar has an economic empowerment committee, both of which have arisen in response to local needs. The variation is most apparent in the range of activities conducted by federations seen across the country including the different campaigns (Box 2.8).

Federations employ participatory processes to build community ownership in resolving issues. They develop linkages with village leaders, *sarpanchs*, and key stakeholders to build support for their activities. They assert their rights, facilitate change and ensure entitlements to programmes without alienating

communities or institutions. For example, in implementing the Gender Just Families project in Andhra Pradesh, sangha and governing body members conducted activities at individual, household and village level with the help of identified village volunteers to build community ownership.

Federations play facilitative and supportive, rather than directive roles. Sanghas expect the federations to intervene in certain instances. These include irregularity of cluster or sangha meetings, or situations where the governing body members do not represent their concerns adequately, or cannot manage their responsibilities. These issues are tabled for open discussion and consequently members are changed. Such changes are made after several rounds of dialogue on reasons for low performance at federation, cluster and village level meetings¹⁷ which demonstrates how accountability is ensured in a transparent, participatory manner.

To ensure that power does not rest in a few hands, rotation of the executive committee members and the governing body members has been written into the by laws. To build a broad base of leaders, a pool of trainers within the federation provides opportunities for women to take up leadership roles in issue-based committees,¹⁸ specific action committees for projects, and institutions like Mahila Court.

The process of peer learning and building on women's knowledge takes place at every level of the structure, i.e. sharing of experiences happens at the sangha, cluster, and at the mandal level federation. Sangha is the basic forum where women are encouraged to share their issues and learning. Federations also take up projects where they exploit their local knowledge and access to the community, thus, keeping project activities close to the ground.

That the federations have imbibed the MS philosophy is evident in their day to day operations, even in the selection of projects. The sangha continues to be the building block of this movement and women's issues are central to every action.

Autonomy

Autonomy of a federation, as a term defines its independence, self-sufficiency and self-governance. There is a growing recognition, through internal analysis and reflection, that empowerment of women is best achieved through enabling federations to be independent and autonomous. Accordingly, it has always been emphasized to sanghas that MS' role is not permanent. Thus the process of building autonomous federations

¹⁵ Interviews with MS staff, March and August 2010.
¹⁶ APMSS Annual Report 1993-94.
¹⁷ APMSS Annual Report 2003-04.

¹⁸ Every sangha is divided into different issue-based committees, such as health, gender, education and panchayati raj and focused capacity building is given to these issue committee members.

has been a part of the vision to provide sustainability and confidence to women to eventually take the movement forward on their own. Given the rights based approach of the MS federations, autonomy can be understood in three dimensions:

- Autonomy of the federation from external agencies (including government, political parties, and micro-finance institutions) is defined as the ability of the federation to make independent choices from external agencies regarding projects, issues, political affiliations and service delivery.
- Autonomy of the sangha within the federation is defined as the independence of the sangha to engage in activities and take up issues on their own without having to concur with the federation. Federations were built as institutions of and for women, and sanghas continue to be the first level of the collective which can respond to the needs of women. Protecting the autonomy of the sangha, not just from other institutions but within the federation itself, thus becomes critical.
- Autonomy of the federation from MS is defined as the ability of the federation to function and take independent decisions without MS support and concurrence.

Political parties might find this large collective of women as an attractive 'vote bank' and other government and non government institutions may also try to exploit their strength for service delivery. However, there is ample evidence to show that federation women have clarity on their mission. While women have different political affiliations, together their goal is to address women's issues and resolve them, and it is this objective that governs their decision to execute certain projects. This autonomy of choice is evident in projects such as girls' enrollment in schools, bridge courses for literacy, and health based campaigns, all of which are seen by women as important. It would be critical to reinforce the goals and mission of federations before MS withdraws, to ensure that the federation remains true to its mission in prioritizing projects in the future.

Retaining the multiple identities of the women as federation, sangha and committee members ensures autonomy at all levels. The crucial indicator of autonomy is that sanghas can operate independently and do not wait for decisions from the federation on every single issue. For instance, when sanghas have to act as pressure groups, they independently do so. Only when they need support, do they refer an issue to the federation.

When MS withdraws from an area, it is expected that the federation will be able to sustain sangha initiatives and perform those functions initially carried out by MS staff.

Box 2.6: Indicative list of functions performed by autonomous federation

- Form and strengthen new sanghas
- Solve internal conflicts within the sanghas and the federation
- Solve conflicts between village, community, and sanghas
- Independent financial management
- Facilitate sangha access to government programmes
- Handle legal disputes
- Act as a pressure group
- Write proposals for fund raising
- Create a separate identity of their own
- Develop linkages and form networks
- Identify the issues in their mandal or block
- Ensure regularity in meetings at sangha, cluster, and federation level¹⁹

These capacities to perform these functions (Box 2.6), identified across three states of Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka and Bihar, has to be built. Federations were at different levels in their ability to perform. Strong federations can perform most of these functions, especially forming and strengthening new sanghas.²⁰ For other functions, such as documentation and proposal writing, analysis and presentation, they continue to seek support from MS. In most cases the federations have been able to manage their finances either by themselves or by hiring accountants. However, the foundation of the proper functioning of the federation is the regularity and the attendance of women in sangha, cluster and federation level meetings.

If they find that a sangha is not meeting due to internal conflict, federations arbitrate. But when the forces of conflict are larger, like that of party and caste politics, federations find it difficult to intervene. As the federation starts building its identity, women utilise the power of their numbers to act as pressure groups to combat violations of women's rights and ensure access to resources, usually at higher levels where sanghas may not have the reach. The Impact section provides examples of such cases.

Although federations are envisaged as independent bodies standing by themselves, many still retain the identity of being a MS federation. The factors that can help a federation build its own identity include registration, the ability to get independent projects and contracts, and to function in areas where MS is not operational. In Bihar, for instance, Jyothi Mahila Samakhya from Muzzaffarpur district is a federation which monitors a sanitation project, manages a MSK funded by UNICEF, and runs Bal

¹⁹ These parameters of autonomy have been consolidated based on discussions across the states. However none of the states have documented autonomy parameters for federations. Therefore, these parameters are flexible and can be changed.

²⁰ DPC interview, Muzaffarpur, Bihar, July 2010.

Shikshan Kendras in Vaishali district (not a MS operational area). Since in these areas, MS is not known, these projects help federations develop an independent identity.

Another important indicator in their journey to autonomy is the federation's ability to identify issues. For instance, strong federations consider social issues, such as child marriage and jogini initiation, as the first priority followed by district level convergence²¹. Federations which are not yet ready, prioritise issues such as sangha strengthening, regularising meetings, and their own capacity building as their primary needs.²²

Role of MS in Building Autonomy

In Andhra Pradesh, there is a defined process of MS withdrawal for federation autonomy in four phases – strengthening, consolidation, withdrawal and handholding, and finally, autonomy. Capacity building is different during each phase for federation members as well as for the MS team.

During the *strengthening* phase, the most important themes discussed are roles and responsibilities of the members, managerial skills, financial management, auditing, proposal writing, and documentation. Federations are given short term projects such as campaigns for girls' education, violence against women and HIV awareness.²³ It is during the strengthening phase that the resource group²⁴ is identified. As they gain experience in the federation process, the women start becoming resource persons for newly formed federations. Increasingly, they also start showing interest in taking overall responsibility for programme activities, a role earlier played by the *sahayogini*. They want to gain experience in this role while MS is still active, so that they can operate independently in the future. Thus, they build capacities to facilitate sangha discussions. A direct impact of this was evident in the *mela* held where members of older federations took sole responsibility to facilitate group discussions for a new federation like the one in Regode mandal in Andhra Pradesh.²⁵ Along with other capacity building measures, such opportunities enable federations to form and strengthen sanghas.

During the *consolidation* phase, structural changes are made in the MS team in the federation areas. The *sahayogini* is withdrawn and the Cluster Resource Person (CRP) is put in charge of 25 villages. As the CRPs are in charge of a larger geographical area, they do not attend all sangha, cluster and federation meetings and perform the routine activities of the federation. However, since the *sahayogini's* role remains

important particularly for the process of institution building, organising training, and facilitating rapport with district or mandal officials, and in providing information on government programmes, women raised her withdrawal as an issue. In cluster and federation meetings they came up with a solution, *"We are in the sanghas for the past many years and we are taking up many programmes on our own. We held your hands and moved forward. Now the time has come to start making our presence more concrete. We are also learning to read and write. Why cant some of us who are educated work as karyakarthis?"*²⁶ Thus the concept of Cluster Organizers (CO) was introduced.

The Cluster Organizer is selected by the federation, with MS support, through a rigorous process of tests, group discussions, and personal interviews, with a minimum criteria of being literate till Class X to ensure the person can document. The CO is responsible for four to five villages with the major responsibility of strengthening the sanghas and identifying field needs for one year. COs are paid an honorarium by MS through the federations. She would have to support the MS district team to plan and coordinate the activities in her designated villages. Once the COs are appointed, MS clarifies their roles and responsibilities, reviews their understanding of MS philosophy, and reorients them on the objectives and non-negotiable principles of the MS programme. This strategy has worked well for the federation, ensuring a continued presence for monitoring the sangha.

MS also starts encouraging federation members to perform the overall documentation function for the federation. The actual moment for such role changes depends on literacy levels, members' capacities and readiness. The federation women were always the main signatories for all financial transactions but initially took support from the functionaries. In this phase, the sangha cash registers, audit reports, basic documentation, and other registers are completely handed over to the federation by MS. Capacity building intensifies in areas of project proposal writing, financial management, legal literacy, documentation skills, and leadership qualities. The ability to identify issues, another crucial aspect of autonomy is built through a rigorous process of action planning beginning from the sanghas to the federation. Networking with government officials is another focus area during this period. It is in this phase that the resource group is also strengthened, with focused capacity building activities including train the trainer sessions, identification of issues and actions to be taken, and their own roles and functions. During the consolidation phase, federations set up their own offices.

21 Convergence refers to linkages of the federation with government officials built through networking.

22 Report of all federations governing body members meeting conducted in Medak on 24th and 25th August 2005.

23 APMSS Annual Report 2008-09, p. 13.

24 Resource group is a group of resource persons from the issue committees of the sanghas. Mentioned later in detail in page number 22.

25 APMSS Annual Report 2003-04, p. 12.

26 *Karyakartha* is the name given to *sahayogini*, the village level functionary in Andhra Pradesh.

Decentralization also requires major role changes within MS, simultaneously increasing staff capacities to meet these new requirements and redefining the future roles of the *sahayoginis*. In this phase, the MS role changes from parenting to being a friend, guide or mentor which requires that they be prepared to deal with any tensions that might arise from these changes. Towards this end, which requires some form of unlearning of their previous functions, MS staff is then trained on personal development and conceptual clarity of autonomy.

Once the federations become independent enough, MS decides to *withdraw* from the federation operations. MS gives a charge note to the federation, which contains all the details about the social indicators of the mandal, details of the work being done by MS in the mandal, and initiatives started by sanghas which the federation is expected to take forward. The next year is considered to be a year of *handholding* for the federation. During this time, the district team takes direct responsibility for monitoring federation functioning and the district staff attend federation and cluster meetings and the complete phasing out of MS is planned. Although, there is an indicative time frame for each federation to achieve autonomy, both the decision to withdraw completely and the time frame varies based on the strength of the federation.

After Achieving Autonomy

Federations go through a learning curve even after achieving autonomy. Initially, they start gaining experience doing activities independently. They start monitoring the sangha, cluster and federation meetings, the Mahila Courts, continuously take up issues in their areas, and start executing their plans. They also start having convergence meetings at the mandal level on their own with government officials. While executing their plans independently, they meet with their first challenges and constraints. Issues of literacy, shortage of funds in implementing projects, lack of resources, and gaps in district level convergence come in the way of their functioning.

At this stage, they turn to MS for support to overcome these challenges. MS conducts short term Mahila Shikshan Kendras²⁷ and literacy camps specifically for federation bodies such as the Executive Committee and governing body, issue committees, and resource groups. Several of these women continue their education through open schools and Adult Learning Centres²⁸ organised by MS. In the role of a resource agency, MS provides resource materials, modules, pamphlets, and technical support

for training programmes, projects, and proposals. MS also continues to update these federations on new laws, government programmes, and entitlements. For instance, to reduce the gap in district level convergence, MS held a district level meeting in Medak district in Andhra Pradesh to facilitate networks between the federation and district level officials. In such forums, federations share their activities, experiences, and concerns with officials and hope to form a district level confederation powerful enough to influence decision making. However, this forum needs to be further systematised. MS also reviews their processes and conducts needs assessments through monthly review meetings.

With these support mechanisms, autonomous federations start to manage large projects independently and execute their action plans. They even approach different departments and institutions for financial support to take forward their initiatives. Organising health camps in convergence with the health department, running residential bridge camps for out of school children with support from Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan²⁹, forming common interest groups among farmers in collaboration with the agriculture department, and implementing a collaborative research project, Gender Just Families in collaboration with CARE India, are some examples of projects that autonomous federations have implemented.



Akshara Jathra in Warangal District, AP

Autonomy of federations is a relatively new phenomenon with the first federation becoming autonomous in Andhra Pradesh only in 2007. MS, and the federations, both continue to reflect, evolve their processes, and strategize to strengthen autonomous federations.

²⁷ Mahila Shikshan Kendras are residential learning centres developed by MS originally for adolescent girls. MSKs have been modified for different contexts. Chapter on work with adolescents provides further details.

²⁸ Adult Learning Centres are village level learning centres for adults. The chapter on adult learning programme in the compendium provides further details of this initiative.

²⁹ Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan is a Government of India programme which aims to provide elementary education to all children in the six to fourteen age-group. The programme lays emphasis on bridging gender and social category gaps at elementary education level.

Functions of the Federation

In their role of spearheading a women's movement, federations play a variety of functions. The broad functions of the federations include building and strengthening the movement, developing linkages with external agencies, and running projects which best fit their overall vision and mission.

Strengthening the Movement

The federations strengthen the movement through rights-based strategies such as acting as a pressure group, awareness campaigns on rights and entitlements and by monitoring local institutions. The resource group within the federation develops capacities in addressing social issues within and outside the federation.

Building the Movement through a Rights Based Approach

The MS programme has itself evolved from the women's movement and federations, from the MS programme. These federations have knowledge, awareness and gender-based consciousness as their most powerful weapons. Federations are budding agencies of poor, marginalised women who are ideologically expanding this movement. For the woman, this movement is about understanding her identity, exercising control over her own body and life, having equal access to resources, and having the opportunity to make decisions affecting her life. A rights-based approach permeates the functioning of the federation and they deploy several strategies including building pressure groups, building awareness within the community and holding government accountable to communities through monitoring them.

■ Act as Pressure Groups

One of the major advantages of a collective is their strength in numbers and the ability to bring a critical mass of women to the bargaining table to negotiate on any given issue. The women use this advantage at the village level, through the sanghas, to put pressure on local governments, institutions or individual families. At the cluster and mandal levels, through the federation, they counter local power structures with an equally strong collective voice provided through a show of numbers. Federations also use this pressure group strategy when an issue spans across a large geographical area and requires to be dealt with on scale and at higher levels. With this strength derived from the collective, women assert their rights through the federation, which they would not have done as individual women or as individual sanghas. Some of the issues which the federation deals with are child marriage, *jogini* or *devadasi* initiation, education, health, water and access to programmes. Box 2.7 in Pulkal mandal in Andhra Pradesh provides evidence of the strength of the collective even in the face of

Box 2.7: Challenging local power structures

In Pedarappetta village, there was a poor family with a mother, a daughter and two sons. The mother had cancer and the medical expenses further accentuated their poverty. Therefore, the girl had to work to get groceries and medical treatment for her mother. One day, the girl sent her brother to collect some water from the common pipe. The *sarpanch* who was building a house was using the pipe for his building and did not let the boy use the water. When the brother took some time to return, she went to enquire at the scene. When she questioned the *sarpanch*, he abused her with bad words, based on her caste and gender. Hearing this abuse, the girl returned home in a state of shock, and committed suicide, by consuming pesticide. The family members informed the sangha and the village community. They were shocked and enraged that the *sarpanch* had used such words. They took the girl's body to the *sarpanch's* house and demanded justice. Around 200 police officials arrived at the scene to protect the *sarpanch*. The federation, in turn, mobilized close to 800 women for the dharna. The police used water cannons on the women, and removed the girl's body from the *sarpanch's* house. Seeing the force of the women, all the big leaders supporting the *sarpanch* ran away. The family was so poor, that they did not even have money for cremation. Though the police offered to give them money, they refused. By that time, federation members from other mandals had also arrived. Together with the village community, they contributed money for the cremation ceremony. The family wanted the *sarpanch* to be punished so the women filed a case against him and finally got him arrested for abetting the girl's suicide.

Source: Interviews with federation women, Andhra Pradesh, August 2010

powerful local elite structures of the village. In normal circumstances, this suicide would have gone unnoticed as the family would not have dared to speak against the *sarpanch*. Even if the family had filed a case against him, it may have resulted in nought because of the support that he had from the police. The women derived their strength from large numbers, which the federation could mobilize, even when police used force against them. By restoring justice for incidents of this kind, the federation reaffirms that such degradation of women, and even psychological violence against them, will not be tolerated.

■ Awareness Building in Community - Campaigns

Knowledge building, information dissemination, awareness creation, and legal literacy at the sangha, village and community levels have been the crux of the MS programme. Over the years, sangha and federation women have taken



Awareness Programme, Nutritional Food Village level meeting in Karimnagar District, AP

new roles as resource persons to share their learning widely. Awareness-building campaigns help create an enabling environment for women and girls, by sensitising families and communities to overcome barriers in the process of empowerment. These campaigns are decided based on issues on the ground. Federations have conducted focussed campaigns on child marriage, enrollment of girl child, dowry, violence against women, alcoholism, *jogini* initiation, discrimination and abuse of girls, customary restrictions on food and mobility that worsen health conditions of women, and HIV awareness. (Box 2.8) In *kalajatha* (cultural mobilisation campaigns) programmes held in Andhra Pradesh, stage plays and stories were used by the women to create awareness on issues. They also conducted discussions in the Gram Sabha to involve villagers in the campaign.

In the annual plan, the federations decide on their focus area and plan for these campaigns in advance. For instance, in the month of June, which is the school initiation



Health stall by Federation on Market Day

Box 2.8: Some campaigns of Andhra Pradesh federations

- Education and enrollment drives in the month of June every year
- Spreading awareness on women's participation in local governance
- Nomination desks during elections to provide information to contestants
- Campaigns against child marriages, *Jogini* initiation
- Awareness drives and campaigns to disseminate information on different issues, Acts like National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, Right To Information Act, Child Marriage Restraint Act, and Marriage Registration Act
- Eye and health camps in collaboration with Non-Government Organizations for health drives
- Awareness drives and campaigns on HIV & AIDS, nutrition, and general health

Source: *Journey from sangham to autonomy*, APMSS
[Http://www.apmss.org/towards_autonomy.php](http://www.apmss.org/towards_autonomy.php)

period, they would concentrate on enrollment campaigns while during marriage period they would concentrate on child marriage campaigns.

- **Monitoring Government Programmes and Resources**
 Monitoring programmes and services is the strategy by which women hold government agencies accountable to the community. Federations increasingly take on this role to ensure better quality of goods and services, and for women to access their entitlements on issues that are important to them. Through this monitoring, women are able to ensure that local institutions function properly and utilize public funds appropriately. In some cases, they act as pressure groups to hold officials accountable and sometimes utilise their networks in the system to deliver service. Federation members also try to monitor programmes by engaging with the monitoring committees of local institutions such as the Village Education Committee, or the Social Justice Committee of the Gram Panchayat. Often sangha women become members of these committees and federation women take on issues reported by the sangha to block, district offices and line departments (Purushothaman, 2003). The Data Exhibition initiative in Assam is a classic example of the federations' monitoring capacity³⁰. The *Oni Gumpu* methodology innovated by Mahila Samakhya Karnataka consisted of the entire village being divided into neighbourhood groups of 20 people. These groups then monitored government services and raised awareness by spreading information about specific issues (Purohit, 2006).

30 See chapter on the Data Exhibition in the compendium.

Acting as the Resource Group on Issues

A manifestation of autonomy is the move away from MS providing expertise, to the federations themselves developing a pool of resource experts. In Andhra Pradesh, the village level sanghams are divided into five issue based committees. Five members representing each committee from every sangha, meet at the cluster level (group of five to six villages). Specialised inputs and capacity building is done for issue based committee members and new leaders emerge within these committees. At the cluster level, five members from each issue committee from each cluster join together to form the Mandal Resource Group (MRG). This resource group is primarily a group of trainers recognised as experts by external agencies who provide inputs to new sanghas in new areas of operations for MS, government, and other NGOs on social issues such as health, education and gender. They also act as resource persons for data collection and project implementation. In Bihar, a resource group is formed at the Unit level³¹. These women have naturally evolved as resource persons, either by virtue of their ability to learn or through their interest in the subject.

Linkage to Government departments and programs

Networking and linkages with departments and institutions is an essential strategy in the journey towards sustainability. There are

many informal and formal relationships that have facilitated the functioning of the federation. The purpose of these linkages is to bring in attitudinal changes in officials, to include women friendly agendas in government policies, and create a positive environment for social change. Convergence meetings facilitate access to government services and enhance the scope for joint activities with the government.

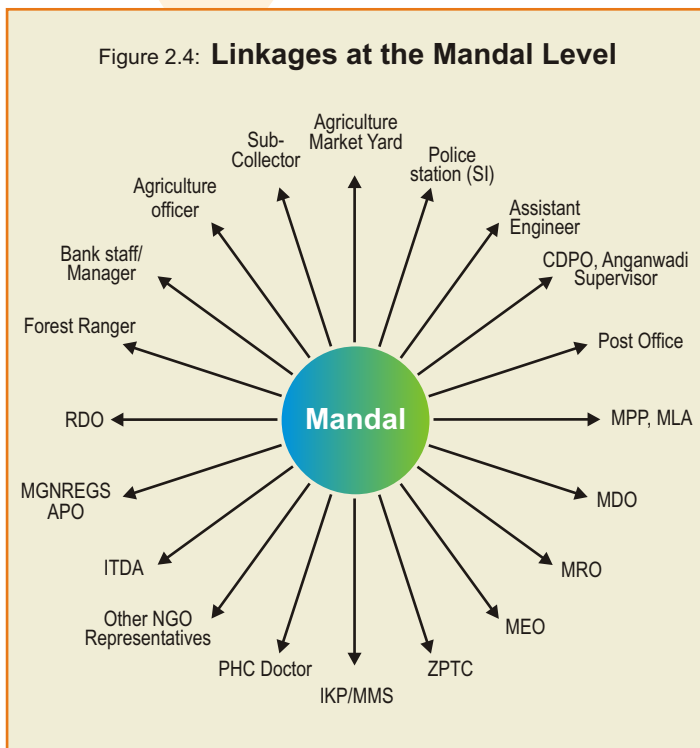
At the village level, the focus is on ensuring local government institutions such as panchayats, *anganwadis*, schools and Primary Health Centres function properly and that women can access their entitlements. Linkages to the Gram Panchayat facilitate resolutions favourable to women and those with the *anganwadi* teachers help girls' education. The sanghas also reach out to village level organisations such as Self-Help Groups,



Federation members give application to District Collector for construction of Mandal office

youth groups and village committees. In addition, the sangha builds linkages with key people such as the *sarpanch*, village elders, and other community leaders to garner community support.

At the mandal level, the federation develops linkages with government institutions to help sanghas access rights and resources across the block. These linkages include the Mandal Development Office, Mandal Education Officer, bank managers, post office, Child Development Programme Officer, among others. Convergence meetings are conducted at mandal level, initially by MS and later by the federations. Government officials are invited to these meetings where the federation members present their work and negotiate around sangha needs. At the district level, linkages with the District Collector, line departments, District Legal Services Authority, Zilla Parishad enable federations to both gain recognition and leverage projects, like Food for Work given by the district collector to the federations in Medak district, Andhra Pradesh. Legal aid service agencies



31 Unit level in Bihar is equivalent to the block level in Andhra Pradesh.

trained the legal committees and provided identity cards for the Mahila Court members. MS continues to play an intrinsic role in facilitating district level linkages and transferring this skill to the federation is a stated focus area for future capacity building in Andhra Pradesh.

Development Initiatives - Social Projects

As the federation becomes more independent, like MS, they too manage larger projects. Boxes 2.9 and 2.10 are examples of projects run by the federations and provide evidence of the increased capacity of federations to handle large projects. Federations play three types of roles in these projects – a direct implementation role as in the case of MSK; a role of coordination where sanghas implement the project such as the total sanitation

Box 2.9: Federations manage projects independently

In 2004-05 federations in Andhra Pradesh took up the project of reducing dropouts and increasing retention of children in government schools funded by Naandi Foundation. Initially, Naandi Foundation convened a meeting with the federations in the district to explain the objectives and activities. Accordingly federations made an action plan to conduct *kalajathas* and awareness programmes in 100 villages in seven mandals. They prepared a detailed proposal and a budget estimate of 2,00,000 rupees for a two month programme which Naandi Foundation directly gave the federations. The federations then identified the *kalajatha* team from among the sangha women and teachers from Bal Mitra Kendras and modified their own *kalajatha* scripts to tackle this issue. Two teams performed *kalajathas* to build awareness on the importance of education evoking a strong positive response from the villagers. At the same time for this contract they were able to maintain accounts, bills and audit their finances.

Source: APMSS Annual Report, 2004-05.

project; or a third role where sanghas can access services and resources through the federation as in Samatha Dharini project.

Federations Forging Change

Federations, the bedrock of the movement, have been able to challenge social inequalities and gender discrimination that have been cultivated over centuries of patriarchy and oppression. This agency of marginalised women plays an important role in improving women's literacy and education and increasing participation in local governance. They ensure access to rights and entitlements by influencing local institutions, both government

Box 2.10: Projects handled by federations in Andhra Pradesh and Bihar

Rajiv Vidya mission: This is an initiative aimed at rehabilitating out-of-school children and child labourers to formal schools through a Residential Bridge Course (RBC) of six months in Andhra Pradesh. The federations were given the responsibility of running a RBC under the Rajiv Vidya Mission, funded by Sarva Shikshan Abhiyan (SSA) who gave 3,50,000 rupees for the project. In this project, the federation had direct contract with SSA for executing the programme.

Samatha Dharini project: This project in Andhra Pradesh was started with the objective of bringing fallow land under cultivation, improving food security of farmers and improving technical skills of women farmers. Funded by UNDP, sanghas were given 30,000 rupees to 75,000 rupees as Micro Capital Assistance for an agricultural activity. The project was closed formally in 2004 and federations became the coordinating organisations for performing administrative and monitoring roles such as audits, bills and budget planning for continuing the initiative. The sanghas gave 500 rupees to the federation for the above support.

Village contact drive in Andhra Pradesh: This was a campaign funded by ICDS where the federation women spread awareness about iodine salt and the importance of breast feeding.

Total Sanitation project in Bihar: This project was launched to generate and meet demands from the community in the area of sanitation. Having no toilets at home was a big problem for women, who would even avoid drinking water rather than go out to the fields before or after sunset. MS also partnered with this project where sangha women were trained as masons to build toilets and would also act as mobilizers in their villages to create awareness about the health benefits of using hygienic toilets.

Childline - Helpline for Child Labourers in Bihar: Funded by the Childline Foundation who had a direct contract with the federations to help identify and rescue children who were being trafficked. The federations are running three centres in the Sitamarhi district.

MSK funded by UNICEF in Bihar: The federations run UNICEF funded MSKs in several districts. In this case too, the federations have signed contracts directly with UNICEF. During the floods in Bihar, the federations were also involved in disaster management projects funded by UNICEF.

Source: All federations network meeting report, APMSS and BMSS Annual reports and project reports.

and non government. Through campaigns, they proactively raise awareness, create an enabling environment, and build a cadre of change agents both within and outside the sanghas. They make use of institutions such as the Bala Sanghams and Kishori Manchis to build a sensitized second generation of girls and boys. These change agents take on the mission of challenging community traditions and practices that are harmful to women as well as engage in campaigns to enrol girls into schools, improve sanitation, increase political participation to name a few. The story of Kishtamma (Box 2.11) demonstrates how the process has impacted the social, economic and political spheres of a woman's life and the community at large. The biggest impact is that federations have given birth to several such empowered Kishtammas.



Kishtamma

Box 2.11: **The Story of Kishtamma**

Kishtamma has been associated with the federation for 14 years where she worked on health and children's issues. She has two children, one 19 year old son and a 17 year old daughter, both studying in college. She was also involved in the literacy drive for children of the sangham women and for the whole village. She wanted to be literate to gain access to information. She enrolled herself in night schools in her village. Men used to taunt her for being enthusiastic to study, but she did not let their jibes come in the way of her thirst for further knowledge. She had no money to buy slate or chalk. She used the *matki* (earthen pot to hold water) to write words.

Sometimes, she used to borrow chalks and slate from neighbouring school children. Now, Kishtamma writes the minutes of the sangham meetings for the federation. Before, she became a member of the sangham, Kishtamma was not aware of banking and savings. Now, she has opened her bank account with the help of the federation. She also knows how to withdraw and deposit cash.

Attitudinal change of family members: When she initially joined the sangham, her family members were suspicious of her involvement. Earlier, women were not allowed to step outside the threshold of the house. After, seeing her progress in the sangham and capacity to change many lives around her, her family has stopped opposing her activities in the federation and her husband even wholeheartedly supports it. Her father-in-law even reminds her about the federation meetings and encourages her to attend them.

Tackling social issues: Alcoholism was a wide-spread problem with husbands returning drunk in the evenings and beating up their wives. Kishtamma led a mandal wide campaign against alcoholism. Women burnt bottles of *saara* (country liquor) before the *Sarpanchs*. After the *dharna*, the husbands beat their wives for raising the issue. The sangham women then individually counselled men and thus curbed the

problem through continuous counselling. After Kishtamma became involved in the anti-liquor campaign, her husband who also used to drink *kallu* (country liquor) became conscious of her efforts to advocate the ill-effects of liquor consumption. Moreover, his wife's campaign would back-fire if her own husband was an alcoholic. He slowly began to abstain from drinking, supported by both Kishtamma and their two children. Kishtamma's husband has praised her contribution towards the family and the community and even helped her in the daily household chores.

A hierarchy of castes was prevalent in her village. The Patels who were the upper caste in her village looked down on lower castes who were not allowed to approach or even speak to the Patels. Women had to cover their heads with the *ghoonghat* (veil) and carry their sandals in their hands if they met upper caste members on the street. Women had to wear their sarees up to the knees and not till their heels as by most castes. Kishtamma along with other sangham women challenged the age-old tradition that segregated and antagonized one human being from another. Kishtamma went to meet the leaders of the upper castes with selected women to persuade them to treat the lower castes, especially women with respect. She needed strength in numbers, so she mobilized other women to discuss the problem with the Patels. After continuous meetings, the Patels abandoned several of these disrespectful practices.

Demand for better infrastructure: When the village *sarpanch* visited the wards in 2010, she pointed out the poor drainage system in her house and surrounding areas. She demanded drainage pipes be replaced immediately saying that access to water was a basic right for all. Impressed by the intensity of her reproof, the *sarpanch* summoned labourers to build a new drainage system the very next day.

Functioning of village schools: Concerned with the non-performance of village schools, Kishtamma participated in the school committee meeting where she demanded that the funds

provided by SSA be better used. The Mid-Day Meal (MDM) was served in unhygienic conditions. Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan provides some funding for the midday meal for the school. Kishtamma demanded that the money should also be utilized to procure iodine salt and soap for washing hands and utensils before and after meals. A resolution was passed in effect which incorporated her demands.

Health: Kishtamma had obtained mid-wife training from MS which proved useful when her niece suddenly went into labour and it was too late to call the hospital. Kishtamma rose to the occasion and executed the techniques she had acquired in the training. She remembered to use a new blade during the process. She always keeps the instruments (provided by MS) required for such purposes in her house. She ensured a safe delivery for her niece and both the mother and the baby turned out healthy. She also ensured that the newborn received post-natal care. When the nurses from the PHC heard, they were amazed that Kishtamma alone had delivered the child.

Kishtamma herself, became a trainer on health related issues especially on hygiene and sanitation. She advocated the use of iodized salt and other nutrients needed in food for expecting mothers. Her advice on nutrition and health made women not think twice about spending money on nutritious food.

Kishtamma was actively involved in the HIV/AIDS campaign, disseminating information on how HIV/AIDS could be prevented. *Paccha putt* or applying tattoos is a common practice in the district. Often, the same needle is used on different persons, increasing the risk of HIV infection.

Kishtamma advised the villagers to avoid *Paccha putt*. She advocated with nurses and the community against the use of old blades and syringes by people and hospitals. In the awareness campaign on HIV/AIDS, she along with other sangham women organized mandal level training where many people were tested and four to five persons found their status to be HIV+. For those who turned out to be positive, counselling services were provided on nutrition and medical care. Psychological support to counter the stigma associated with the disease was provided to both patients and their families.

Role as a panchayat member: Kishtamma contested the panchayati elections and won by a large margin receiving even

more votes than the *sarpanch*. She has worked closely with the Gram Panchayat on issues concerning drainage, bore-wells and sanitation. The community experiences severe water shortages at times. Kishtamma had even fought with the village *sarpanch* to lay down drainage pipes in the village. At the panchayat meetings, a resolution was passed for laying drainage pipes/bore-wells in the water shortage areas. But a new dispute emerged between three wards who demanded these services in their respective areas. A scuffle had broken out between people of these three wards. Kishtamma told the two contending ward members, *“You have plenty of water as there are drainage pipes in your wards. Our ward has none and there is an acute scarcity of water. Hence, we should be getting the bore-wells.”* To avoid conflict, the bore-wells were placed in the dead of the night without the knowledge of the lower caste communities. The conflict grew with political parties getting involved as the *waada sangham* (homogeneous community) was SC dominated. She then took the issue to the mandal level and convinced the parties that water should be supplied to the hardest hit ward. After the water supply was restored in the ward, people appreciated her efforts and often thank her for working for their cause.

Kishtamma is a member of the federation legal committee. The *zilla* (district) judges now refer cases to her as they are impressed with her training and performance and have even provided ID cards for the legal committee members.

Kishtamma says she did not become empowered overnight or through a single incident. She has gained courage and determination to face odds through a plethora of experiences courtesy the federation Kishtamma wants to learn more, considering each day as a new challenge and learning experience for her. She also wants to learn English and Hindi in order to communicate with a wider audience. She sees education as a necessity for all sangham women to become independent and empowered. She also wants her children to study more and come up in life. Ensuring quality education for her children has been a challenge for her intensified by the recent death of her husband, but Kishtamma has vowed to rise above all challenges and meet them as she had done before.

Source: Interview with Kishtamma in Andhra Pradesh, March 2010

Empowering Women

Empowerment through Education

Most sangha women had little or no opportunity for formal education when they were young. So when they joined the sangha and started enrolling in short-term literacy classes, they were able to learn for the first-time. MS also tries to ensure that

the governing body members are literate for which short term Mahila Shikshan Kendras (MSK) and literacy camps are held. Of the 331 participants of the short term MSKs, 282 governing body members were trained in literacy skills.³²

Their horizons have expanded in terms of reach and sheer mobility (Box 2.12) with many women travelling on their own,

across villages, mandals, and even to the state capitals for meetings and training programmes. Resource group members are even recognised as experts on certain issues and have been instrumental in passing on the learning to others.

These literacy skills contribute practically in women's daily lives by helping them to read billboards and fill applications for government programmes. Basic literacy skills have proved to be extremely relevant for women in their routine activities like daily purchases. Many governing body members, like Prameela, Andole Federation President in Andhra Pradesh, have applied for the open school tenth standard exam. The federation women also experience simple practical benefits of literacy in being able to track the progress of their children's education. Savitri, the president of Jyothi Mahila Samakhya, the federation in Muzaffarpur district in Bihar takes her son to college for his admission and also knows how he has performed in each subject.³³

Box 2.12: Increased mobility through literacy

Education provided me mobility. I was not able to see the world beyond my village. Before, I could not even take a bus-ride alone, because I could not read the number of the bus. I would not step out of my house as I could not read directions. The only time I used to venture out of my home was to see the jatra (a religious fair) in the village, with my husband or other family members. Sometimes, while traveling in the bus, men would occupy seats reserved for women. As I was illiterate, I could not read that the seats were meant for women and so, I did not ask the men to vacate the seats. After gaining literacy, I am able to travel alone. If I find men occupying seats meant for ladies, I ask them to vacate immediately as I know the rules.

- Rathamma, a federation member from Medak district, Andhra Pradesh in an interview in March 2010

In autonomous federations, as MS intervention minimized, members now write their own reports, open bank accounts, manage finances and document their meetings. While seeking funds for projects, members have started writing proposals either by hiring external services or by taking help from MS. In Bihar, several federation projects are funded by external agencies like the UNICEF where women have been able to detail their plans, budget estimates and expected outcomes of these projects. Women like Narsamma in Andhra Pradesh reported that they can now document federation meetings and have even written their own life stories in Telugu.

The Rise of Women Leaders

Earlier, a woman's identity was embedded in her family, caste

and political party, which often came through male family members. The sangha and federation, however, provides women an independent identity. Savitri says, "Earlier, people used to know me by my husband's name but now, they come to the village and ask for the President's house and the villagers say *namaskar*³⁴ to me when they see me." Activities in the sanghas and federations have given rise to several managers and leaders among the women. Rotation of leadership and the resource groups provide more women the opportunity to take different responsibilities. Federation women like Vibha, serve as role models for their families and the larger community (Box 2.13). They have acquired people management skills and have learnt to track progress while running projects like MSKs, Residential Bridge Courses and Samatha Dharini. The DPC in Muzaffarpur had this to say about the MSKs run by the federation "For MSKs, their [federations] monitoring format is better than ours. They have one column where they keep track of what the parent has to say about the child's progress – something which we don't have in the MSKs which MS runs."

Federations and sanghas provide women multiple opportunities to develop many facets of leadership. For instance, Kishtamma is a Gram Panchayat member, trainer, legal committee member, midwife and federation leader all rolled into one. (Box 2.11) Such

Box 2.13: Emerging leaders in the community

Vibha is the secretary of the federation in Muzaffarpur in Bihar. A young Brahmin widow with a son and daughter, Vibha braved ridicule and ostracism to become the first woman mason under the sanitation programme in Bihar. When other women in the training started dropping out of the intensive training, the PHED engineer – in – charge was impatient and insensitive. He believed that, "women don't work as much or as well as men". But Vibha successfully completed the training and while the project was speeding full swing, worked for about 20 to 22 days a month at the production centre. She has been all over Bihar and even to Khandwa in Madhya Pradesh to train other women masons. She has improved her skills through distance learning courses. Her children take immense pride in her and consider her as a role model. Since the sanitation project does not occupy her full time now due to lack of funds, she has now moved on to take up other responsibilities like running the MSK in the district of Vaishali where MS is not even operational. As Vibha realised her own potential as a leader from one project, she was able to take her learning to other areas.

Source: Mahila Samakhya brings sanitation to Bihar report, BMSS

33 DPC Interview, Muzaffarpur, Bihar, July 2010.

34 A traditional Indian greeting

a variety of roles teach women like her to support others in development actions and decisions, assert rights, act collectively, and impart information to others. The leadership skills that women develop through the sangha and the federation are of a different nature than the traditional 'charismatic leader' image. Women thus develop leadership skills as a tool for empowerment where they emerge as leaders through collective action and through facilitating others to become leaders.

Engendering Governance

Women bring these leadership skills that they learn in their capacity as federation leaders in to the panchayat, thus engendering this sphere of political leadership. In one sense, while they are not networked the way local elites are to political channels of influence, in another sense they do have an edge over their counterparts, because of their new and unique styles of multi-faceted leadership. Such a form of engendered leadership is inclusive and facilitative. An illustration of this form of leadership is best seen in Box 2.11 where Kishtamma mobilises other women to challenge caste-based practices that were discriminatory to women.

The federation opens channels into politics by ensuring more women participate in electoral processes and in voicing their demands in the Gram Sabhas where an important strategy used is providing panchayat literacy skills (see chapter on panchayat literacy in the compendium). Before elections, federations in Andhra Pradesh held a pre-election voter awareness campaign, to motivate and facilitate greater participation of women in the general seats, as there was a misconception that only men and upper caste people can contest in these seats. At the time of elections, federations set up nomination desks in the mandal offices to give information to candidates on certificates required on the panchayat reservation and assisted them to fill up the nomination forms. In the election year 2006-07 in Andhra Pradesh, 4,272 women from the sanghas contested different



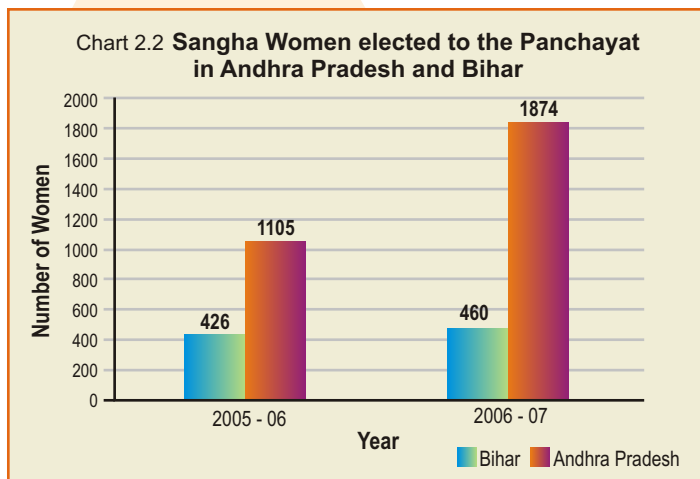
Voter awareness campaign Panchyat election, Banjerupalli, Husnabadmandal

positions, of which 1,874 women were elected (Chart 2.2) Among these, 148 women got elected in general seats.

Building a critical mass of sangha and federation women, who enter political structures with a strong gender perspective, sets the stage for an engendered development agenda which prioritises women's needs. A federation woman from Medak district

reporting on gender differences in development priorities said, "When men think of development, they think of roads, buildings and structures and women think of development as water, health and education." The women also assert their rights in the panchayat if they find that their voices are not heard. Prameela from Andole federation in Andhra Pradesh says, "Sometimes, when women were elected to the panchayat, husbands would come on behalf of their wives to the panchayat meetings and would even sign on their behalf. After a few times, I raised this issue in the panchayat and passed a resolution that only the actual ward members should come for the meeting, not their relatives. Minutes were also not recorded and I brought that up also." Thus, the federation has provided the training ground for women to claim their legitimate space as leaders, raise the standards of democratic practice, and bring transparency and accountability into the operations of local government mechanisms.

Political empowerment is also determined by the kind of choices taken by the women. In times of heavy corruption during election campaigns, where free gifts are given to people to influence their votes, the federation plays a role in ensuring that people are able to take the right choices. Prameela says, "In our village, there was a sarpanch who was not working properly. Even if we went to him, he would not respond to our problems. The women chose to support another person who they believed would help them. They held a village meeting at a far off place and the candidate promised that he would work for them. The women supported him and consequently he got elected." It is in this manner that women take strong stands against existing bad practices in



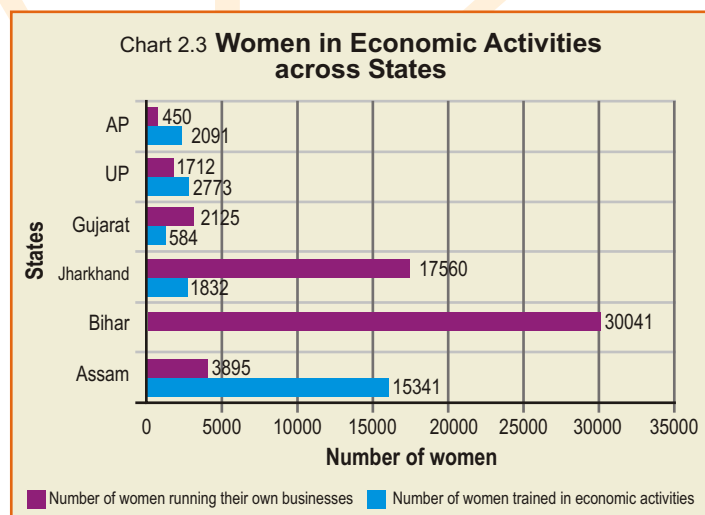
governance and set new standards of accountability. This leads to improved and engendered governance which holds leaders to higher standards of performance, is inclusive, demands the fair and equitable distribution of resources, and ensures that public resources are used for their intended purpose.

Livelihoods and Savings

While MS federations' primary focus has been on social issues they have begun to explore livelihood improvement through savings and by running small businesses. In all the federations, the sanghas also operate as a savings unit. Looking at the economic initiatives nationally, Bihar and Jharkhand have the highest track record of linking women to livelihood programmes. (Chart 2.3) Depending on the requirements of the women, federations raise capacity building needs to MS around skills for businesses, enters into contracts and once group businesses are initiated, the federation also monitors them.



Woman with a small business



In Bihar, 560 women have been trained as masons across nine districts.³⁵ The *samoohs* have got together to take up income generating activities like bangle making and catering. At the behest of the Education Department of the Bihar Government *samoohs* have taken contracts to provide cooked meals to school children under the Midday Meal programme at the panchayat level.³⁶ "I am standing on my own feet" says a woman who is a part of the catering unit. Depending on their choice and the demand in the market, vocational training on bangle-making, jute, candle-making, compost-making and creating products out of jute, bamboo and jewellery are provided by MS. The case below is of a fisheries business in the district of Saraikela in Jharkhand (Box 2.14). However, such scale of group businesses is not widely seen across other MS states.

Box 2.14: Women Run Businesses

In Saraikela district in Jharkhand, the *samooh* started a fishery business. The women were given training at district level for three days. To obtain permission to fish in the pond, the women had to lobby at block and district level. After the government allowed them to fish in 2009, they caught their first pool of fish with a profit of 43,000 rupees. Currently the women do not take their fish to the market directly but sell buyers who come to the pond. The *samooh* women say, "Earlier, we were selling grains, which needed more effort and yielded lesser profit. For our fisheries business, we are also thinking of going directly to the market, so that we can make more profit. We will not share our profit now. We will accumulate our profits and buy a tent house later. This tent house will have buckets and cooking vessels which we will rent out for any festival in the village." Source: Interview with sangha women in Saraikela, Jharkhand, July 2010

The 4,092 *samoohs* in Bihar and Jharkhand have initiated economic activities with the help of their savings which amount to around 3,62,000 rupees. In Bihar, women have also accessed credit, through schemes such as SGSY and those run by NABARD (Table 2.1). The federations in Bihar have supported the sanghas getting access to credit by managing a credit fund through the state run programme, Jeevika Bihar Rural Livelihoods Project, financed by the World Bank.

Table 2.1: Businesses through Samoohs in Bihar

Employment		Linkage	
No. of Individual businesses	No. of Collective businesses	NABARD	SGSY
16,534	2,334	327	663

Source: Bihar Annual report 2008-09, p.43

35 BMSS Annual Report 2008-09, p. 45.

36 BMSS Annual Report 2006-07, p. 11.

Changes within the Family

The response of the families to women's participation in the sangha and federation activities has gone through a sea change over the years. Initially, the women had to put up with violence from men, to even attend meetings. In some places, families were suspicious of their activities, but once the sanghas started to contribute to improving lives, their attitudes changed (Box 2.15). Federation women reported a new found respect from their husbands, increased autonomy to attend meetings and increased decision making powers in their homes as gender based attitudes changed in families and the community. Attitudinal changes in the male family members, such as respecting women, and recognising their rights and needs in the family, create an enabling environment. Rathamma, federation president in Medak says, *"Before, I used to wait for my husband and sons to finish their meals and then settle for leftovers (if any). Often, I had to sleep hungry. My husband would not even fetch a glass of water for himself and always expected to be waited upon, even for washing his soiled plate. Now, my husband takes part in*

Box 2.15: Improved status in the family

Venkatavva, a federation member from Karimnagar lives in a joint family with her in-laws and husband. She experienced strong family opposition to her involvement in the sangham initially. Venkatavva devised a strategy to reduce family opposition and persuaded her mother-in-law and sister-in-law to join the sangham. With the help of the sangham, her brother-in-law works in the Adult Literacy Centre as a teacher. She has also helped her husband get employed as mechanic in the gram panchayat. Now, as a government employee he gets a steady income every month. The family members could not criticize her role in the sangham as she was responsible for providing employment to her family members. Venkatavva's strategy to involve her family in the sangham became a success in changing their attitudes towards sangham activities. Her husband now shares household responsibilities without hesitation. She also has a key role in the decision making in the house. The whole family sits together to discuss any issue with everybody having an equal say.

Source: Interview with Venkatavva in Andhra Pradesh, March 2010

household responsibilities. My husband can also prepare food if I happen to be away from home. Today we eat together as a family."

As women become more aware of their rights and learn about health, education and hygiene, this awareness is transferred to

their families. For instance, most federation women get their children educated, and ensure that their daughters do not get married before 18 years. For example, Rathamma, federation president from Medak district in Andhra Pradesh faced opposition from her family when she decided to send her daughter to school. But being determined, she insisted that her daughter not be deprived of education. Their work sometimes percolates through



Women in their bindi making enterprise, Banka District, Bihar

to their family as well. For instance, women like Kishtamma (Box 2.11) were aware that changes should occur first within her family before she set out to change her community. After Kishtamma became involved in the anti-liquor campaign, her husband became conscious of her efforts to advocate the ill-effects of liquor consumption and began to abstain from drinking. In Bihar, women also

ensure that their children are aware about the ill effects of alcohol, cigarette and *ghutka*.³⁷

Federations Leave their Mark on the Community

In their struggle for a more humane and just society, women challenge deprivations not just for themselves but also for the larger community of which they are a part. Being part of a grassroots movement that is inclusive, the focus at all times continues to be the survival and improvement of quality of life of the larger collective.

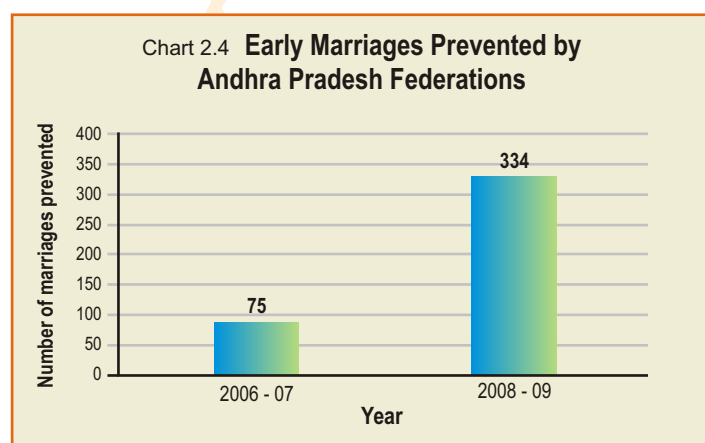
Creating an Enabling Environment for Women

An enabling environment is necessary for women and girls to exercise their rights and for institutions such as sanghas to function effectively. This requires families and local institutions to change their attitudes towards women and recognize their leadership. It also requires that practices that are harmful to women are challenged. Programmes such as the Bala Sanghams and the Kishori Manchis³⁸ provide gender education to both boys and girls to change attitudes within the community. The campaigns run by the federation at community level create broad

³⁷ *Ghutka* is a preparation of crushed areca nut (also called betel nut), tobacco, catechu, lime and sweet or savory flavorings, considered to have severe negative health effects.

³⁸ See separate chapter on "Work with Adolescents" in the compendium.

based awareness on the rights of women and girls that sets the stage for subsequent activities of the sanghas and federations. Attitudes of panchayats towards sanghas have also changed over the years, from hostility to acceptance. When asking a sarpanch if the sangham had helped the panchayat, he responded with *“There has been mutual and convergent support. Sangha supports the Gram Panchayat for mobilisations.”*³⁹ In Andhra Pradesh, the Gram Panchayats and the sanghas have a mutually beneficial relationship. Sanghas look for panchayat support to solve village level issues in schools, health centres, *anganwadis*⁴⁰ and also to escalate these issues to higher levels of the administration. The sanghas help the panchayat members in creating awareness, in identifying the right beneficiaries, mobilising the community to take up activities and in sensitising the community through demonstrations and campaigns. By working together with the federation, mainstream administrative structures have become more open to include women favourable policies and resolutions in the community. The federations continue to work against practices like *child marriage* and *Jogini*⁴¹ which are prevalent in the villages. In the year 2006-07, the federations prevented 75 early marriages. In 2008-09, four times as many were stopped. (Chart 2.4)⁴² In Bihar, 437 out of 591 known cases of child marriage were prevented in 2008-09⁴³. Rathnamma says, *“The jogini tradition was prevalent in my village. We counselled the joginis about the problems related to their trade. Details of the different government schemes were also provided to the joginis.”* The federation has been able to stop the practice of *jogini* in some areas.⁴⁴



Violence perpetrated against individual women in their own families and communities is another crucial issue that the sangha and the federations address. The Nari Adalat is yet another

innovative practice that emerged as a grassroots response to incidents of violence which the individual sanghas had begun to address. The Nari Adalat operates as an alternative justice forum for women, by women and of the women, and is deeply embedded within the federation structure.

Access to Resources for the Community

The federation takes up issues for the community like wages, work for MGNREGS, water, pension and health. Through the strength of their collective, linkages and increased access to information, the federation is able to access resources for the community.

Since poverty is the root cause of many problems faced by women, it is imperative that the sangha’s activities lead to a degree of economic benefit for the members. Financial improvement, however marginal, helps women send their



MGNREGS work in Medak District

daughters to school and resist practices like child labour. Federations have raised the issue of better wages for women, in areas where gender disparity in wages existed (Box 2.16). This fight for their rights has enabled women to get employment through MGNREGS in several states especially Uttarakhand. See chapter on panchayat literacy.

Ellamma, from Pappanapet mandal in Andhra Pradesh narrates how the federation helps the community access their entitlements. *“In our village, the deserving people were not getting pension and instead others were getting it. We asked the sarpanch why some people were not getting their pensions. The sarpanch told us not to intervene. The federation then made the correct list of eligible villagers who had not got their pensions and they went to the MPDO and requested him to take action. When*

39 Interview with Krishna, Sarpanch, Sulthanpur, Pulkal District, 18 March 2010.

40 Anganwadi is a government sponsored child-care and mother-care center in India.

41 Devadasi/Jogini is a Hindu religious practice in which girls are “married” and dedicated to a deity or temple. The marriage usually occurs before the girl reaches puberty and requires her to become a prostitute for upper-caste community members, en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Devadasi

42 APMS Annual Report 2006-07 and 2008-09.

43 BMSS Annual Report 2008-09, p. 18.

44 Swashakti Mahila Federation, Annual Report 2010, Andole Mandal, Medak District, Andhra Pradesh.

the MPDO came for a field visit he compared the federation's list with the sarpanch's list and asked why some names were not included for pension. Convinced that some people had not received their entitlement, the MPDO ensured that pensions for

Box 2.16: Fighting for Their Economic Rights

In the year 2000, in Andole mandal in Andhra Pradesh, women were getting very low wages from the Patels and therefore boycotted work. Women used to get 10 rupees and a bottle of *kallu* (liquor) as wages while men used to get two bottles. The Patels, being rich farmers, then employed labourers from neighbouring villages. Women first discussed the issue at cluster level and then mobilised other clusters to demand a hike in the wages. They also insisted that they be given nutritious food like eggs and vegetables instead of liquor. The issue was finally resolved at the Gram Sabha meeting. Now, they are getting 100 rupees as wages.

Source: Interview with federation women, Andhra Pradesh, March 2010

the right candidates were released". As a result of the federation efforts, the community experiences concrete benefits that have added to the legitimacy of the federations over time and earned respect for its members.

Challenging Corruption

Bribing officials for services which are right fully theirs has become a way of life. The federations have been able to use their collective strength to deal with corruption. By standing up for their rights, federations question the *status quo* of corrupt methods, which the community otherwise would never have dared to raise (Box 2.17). Here, the federation's reach up to district level is what allows them to exercise pressure on officials and local institutions. Unlike a typical hierarchical structure, the federation represents a horizontal organisation, with autonomy at various levels. Federation women, therefore, have the freedom

to approach any level of the government to address their issues without having to wait for approval. The norms that the federation stands for, have established their identity as an institution that will not condone corruption. In Bihar, the federation women also say, "The police do not ask us for bribes because they know that we will raise our voice, if they do."

Creating a Gender Sensitive Second Generation

A second generation of leaders are now being developed by the sanghas and federations through a series of initiatives. These include the Bala Sanghams in Andhra Pradesh, the Kishori

Box 2.17: The federations challenge corruption

In Chandampet village, a girl wanted to get a college seat. On the day of admission, one of her relatives died and she could not go. When she went the next day the admissions officer said, "There is no seat. How can we keep the seat exclusively for you? The time for admission is over and you will not get the seat, if you don't come on time." He however said, "Give me 5,000 rupees and I will give you a seat". If he could offer a seat for money, it meant the seat was still available. Federation women spoke to the sarpanch who also said, "Give the college the money and you will get the seat." The women then went to the collector's office. Since he was not there, they went to the MLA's house and told him about the issue. The MLA immediately spoke to the officer and he agreed to give them the seat. The next day, the girl got her seat at no cost. The officer told the women, "I did not think that you would go to that level"

Source: Focus group discussions with federation women, Medak, Andhra Pradesh, August 2010.

Manchas in Assam, the Jagjagi Kendras in Bihar and the Mahila Shikshan Kendras across several states.

These initiatives do not stand alone and are only effective because of their links to the larger movement through the sanghas and federations, who play a major role in mobilising adolescents and children to participate. When adolescents start to act as change agents in the community, it is the sanghas and federations that provide them the larger support and enable their growth as leaders. Federations also monitor these initiatives and ensure their regular functioning. When MS withdraws from an area, it is the federations which take complete ownership of these initiatives and sustain them.

Through enrollment campaigns, the federations in Andhra Pradesh have been able to mainstream children into educational institutions. Around 7,000 children were enrolled in schools and 460 girls were enrolled in Andhra Pradesh in 2009. (Chart 2.5)



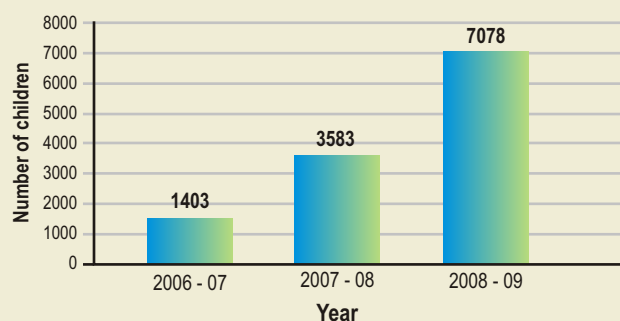
Rally against the brutal killing of women 1999-2000, Medak District, AP

Fighting for Issues Important to the Community

Feudalism and caste-related issues, which are not necessarily gender specific, are areas where federations challenge existing power relations. (Box 2.18) The capacity of the movement to respond to multiple issues makes it relevant to the women and the communities they belong to. These are instances where the federation is empowered enough to address any issue that comes their way, at any level.

In tribal areas, sanghas have been able to protect their land and environment through the strength of their numbers. Sangha women in Saraikela district in Jharkhand narrate the incident of how they prevented a cement factory from taking over their land (Box 2.19).

Chart 2.5 **Number of children enrolled in schools in Andhra Pradesh**



Box 2.18: Federation fights police brutality and landlord oppression

In Karimnagar district, Naxals demanded that the landlords who owned vast tracts of land, share the land with the villagers. In this struggle, which lasted several days, landlords bribed the police to beat the agitators, including women and children. The villagers organized a meeting with the support of MS to seek a solution to the conflict. The federation placed the issue of police brutality in front of the higher authorities complaining about the atrocities committed against them. The villagers had taken photographs of the women beaten by the police which was provided as proof. An overview of the ground situation was provided to the police. Three days later, the police came to the village and held discussions with the landlords following which, brutality on the villagers stopped. The conflict between the landlords and the villagers was resolved with land distributed to the villagers.

Source: Interviews with Venkatavva, Karim Nagar, Andhra Pradesh, March 2010.

Box 2.19: Sangha women protect the land

A cement factory was planned to be set up in a nearby village known as Seema. The factory promised one family a large amount of money and thus got some land but needed more. *“We knew that, if we give our land to the factory, it would get polluted and we would not be able to do agriculture. We wrote letters to the village pradhans in nearby villages, and talked to people there. We had a meeting at another common village and decided that we will not allow the factory to be set up. More than a thousand people protested in a rally marching to the District Collector’s office. However, the DC suggested that we would get jobs and schools if the factory was set up. We told the DC, “Sir, we are not educated and we will not get any jobs. Engineers will come from outside. We want to do agriculture and will not give our land.” When factory officials came to the village, the women mobilized and confronted him. When they tried to place their factory banner on our land, we removed it. Factory officials developed some supporters among the villagers and even tried to bribe the MS functionary, but we, women were able to stop them from setting up the factory and now continue with our agriculture.”*

Source: Interview with federation women in Saraikela District, Jharkhand, July 2010.

Broader Impact

While the federations have not yet changed policies and laws, they have most certainly changed practices of local governments, and the manner in which laws, policies and programmes are implemented so as to favour women. This impact has come directly from the active democratic participation of elected women representatives in the Gram Panchayat, and of women in the Gram Sabha, earlier attended only by men – a direct impact of the consistent efforts of the federation. Further, federations have been instrumental in bringing into the limelight, issues of development, which are close to the woman - which often represent the basic needs of the community as well. Thus, education, health, water, nutrition and other social practices like child marriage and *devadasi* dedication have been addressed. When local governance and bureaucratic systems fail in their most important role of delivering services and goods, federations take on the role of monitoring and ensuring this delivery to marginalised populations. With their links to local governments, there is improved access to information on public goods and services, which make officials more vigilant to the fact that women and communities have more knowledge about their entitlements. Thus, they help in making the local government

more accountable, transparent, inclusive, equitable and efficient, especially with respect to poor women (Purushothaman, 2008). This relationship between women's federations and the state transcends the typical categories of relations described in the literature of conflict or hostility or collaboration or critical collaboration.⁴⁵ This new relationship is best described as mutual investment (Purushothaman, 2008), recognising each other's strengths and weaknesses and understanding that individual actors, on their own, cannot handle the complexity of issues and problems inherent in development processes and unequal growth.

In Andhra Pradesh, all the federations have got their own offices on land donated either by the panchayat or other local government bodies – another indicator of their increased credibility in the community. The status accorded to federations by the state has enabled a new space to emerge where existing hierarchies and practices can be challenged. This recognition is evident in two ways. First, the state's engagement with different federation initiatives like the Nari Adalat, the women in Gram Panchayat, Bala Sanghams, Adult Literacy Programme and Data Exhibition among many others, have required that women and their federations develop a unique set of relations with different arms of the state. Second, state systems have recognised the capacities of federations to ensure that public goods and services reach the right people through various projects. In Andhra Pradesh, the Food for Work initiative, Rajiv Vidya mission, Samatha Dharini initiative and the KGBV enrollment initiatives given to the federation stand testimony to their increased legitimacy with the state. Similarly in Bihar, the federations run the total sanitation project and the Mid Day Meal Programme. Giving projects, such as food for work and sanitation, which were traditionally run by males, to women to manage, speaks volumes about how women have been able to establish themselves as leaders and managers with the state. Federations of women's sanghas thus become the central element in complementing the process by which governance, development and democracy is engendered. This phenomenon has also contributed to the creation of new models of participatory and transparent service delivery systems.

Lastly, the federations have been able to bring back the sense of ownership of women over community issues. The insensitiveness of the formal and traditional governing systems had always kept women from taking action. Women either tolerated the inefficiency in services or expected the men in the family to take action, who were themselves far from empowered. The federation is a forum where women demand services as a

right and enables the community to get faster and more efficient responses to their needs.



Federation women in MDM scheme, Rohtass, Bihar

Lessons from the Ground

MS was formed, nurtured and expanded as a unique model of empowerment through education and federations play an important role in sustaining this rights-based empowerment model. Its strength is that it is not limited and women could turn to the collectives to tackle any issue that might come their way. Lessons from this movement can provide insights for women's initiatives across the world.

The biggest challenge that these federations face is a lack of **visibility** in policy advocacy. On the other hand, federations of Self-Help Groups (SHGs) and their systematised model of economic empowerment are now well understood by policy and decision makers and their legitimacy well established. While SHG federations have contributed in some degree to women's economic empowerment, they have fallen short of empowering women both socially and politically. Several issues remain unaddressed by these federations including violence, social practices that are detrimental to women, education of their children, reproductive health and their access to decision making arenas. These are all areas of strength for the MS federations and yet among decision makers, there is little understanding of the difference between these two federation models and even less synergy. Therefore, clarity is needed on the difference in the objectives, structure and functions of these two types of federations, the different capacity building elements, resources needed for both, and the diverse impact that can be expected. Advocacy for the rights-based federations will need clear

⁴⁵ There are four categories of state and civil society relations: Co-option, where NGOs exist purely as sources of revenue for their managers and workers, either because they are corrupt or are uncritical contractors of government schemes, with an agenda to meet government targets. In collaboration, NGOs work with the government with a mission to change government policies/practices without overt conflict. Critical collaboration means NGOs engaging with the state in a variety of ways, yet articulating a clear purposive agenda and willing to advance it in both collaborative and oppositional fora. The last category is of conflict, where NGOs reject state funding and articulate a radical, oppositional stance to gender, class, caste, regional religious and/or ethnic inequalities of power. (Purushothaman, 2008).

articulation of guidelines and non-negotiable conditions for their replication to take place in substance and not just in form.

For impact to be captured, indicators of a results framework have been developed by MS. These indicators do not capture innovations of the federations. For instance, when federations run projects like Mid-Day Meal, Public Distribution System and enrollment campaigns, they develop alternate models of governance, which are transparent, democratic, equitable and accountable. Systematic monitoring of local governments through the Data Exhibition or *Oni Gumpu* represent powerful models of civil society monitoring which can inform and benefit the country. These grassroots solutions should not be lost in the crowd, but need to be documented and shared as best practices for **replication**. An innovation fund can help to identify, nurture and share these solutions. The National Resource Centre can facilitate sharing and create learning spaces for women across states. Although exposure visits do happen, these peer learning opportunities can be further formalised.

For **sustainability**, it would be important to build synergies with institutions that address multiple issues that the federations themselves deal with. As MS programmes are located in the Department of Education in MHRD, it has prioritised education programmes for women and girls. However, issues like violence against women, governance and livelihoods require synergies with departments like WCD and P&RD. These synergies would help federations achieve their basic objectives of holistic empowerment and allow them to address the everyday issues that women face in their lives.

This movement has created a broad base of conscious, articulate women leaders, who have now developed the ability to question issues around them. However, these federations have not been able to fully exploit the economic opportunities available to them nationally. Federations may now need to develop strategies to look beyond what the state has to offer in terms of economic benefits like MGNREGS. For women to develop their own independent businesses, MS would need to explore possible livelihood strategies through synergies with poverty alleviation programmes and with civil society institutions who have established track records on livelihoods.

Sustainability also requires building an enabling environment for federations to operate in. The federations and their initiatives are exemplary examples of marginalised women taking the lead in tackling deeply entrenched patriarchal norms. It is now time to use the experience of these women leaders to inform national policy. It is critical that **advocacy initiatives** spear-headed by national women's organisations draw from the grassroots experience, so their advocacy efforts are relevant and inclusive of

the needs of rural marginalised women. Therefore, building strategic networks with women's organisations and influential women leaders can increase the reach of the federations and foster an enabling policy environment.

Creating federations at district, state and national levels can further develop their voice, visibility and legitimacy, a crucial gap that needs to be addressed. A broader vision is needed to create an **independent institutional identity** that can help women's voices be heard at every level. This is fundamentally linked to the issue of autonomy of federations. It is only now that federations have begun to think about autonomy. Today, while sangha formation is a systematic process followed by MS in all states, autonomy is not. Andhra Pradesh has come a long way in articulating and formalising the process of autonomy, which can be replicated. Similarly, federations can look outside MS to learn best practices of autonomous people's institutions.

In spite of these challenges, the transformation evident in the lives of these women, their families and in their communities must be emphasized. From a point where women could not even identify violence and discrimination they now not only resist gender bias, but have been instrumental in changing the social fabric of their communities. These leaders have emerged through a focussed strategy of awareness building in their collectives. The combination of participatory processes and responsive structures make these federations unique in their approach towards women's issues. Only women know their context well enough to create an organization that can best serve their needs, making participatory process a non-negotiable element. The gamut of issues that this structure can accommodate mirrors those that are relevant to poor women and consequently, the strategies, stakeholders and institutions that the federation supports are equally diverse. Thus, while the sanghas which are the corner stone of this movement empower women, it is the federations which are the primary vehicles by which women expand their spheres of influence. Women, it is the federations which are the primary vehicles by which women expand their spheres of influence.



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