

**Strengthening Women's
Federation:
A Collective Assessment**

for

**Mahila Samakhya, Karnataka
(MSK)**

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Strengthening Women's Federation: A Collective Assessment

Report Submitted by Best Practices Foundation for Mahila Samakhya, Karnataka

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Executive Summary

“Education for women’s equality” has been the motto of the Mahila Samakhya program. The provision of educational opportunities for women has been an important part of the movement for women’s empowerment. Education has been used to play a dominant role to change the status of women through neutralizing the gender inequality and accumulated distortions of the past.

Mahila Samakhya is a Government of India programme under the State Department of Education, Ministry of Human Resource Development, Government of India born out of the emphasis given in the New Education Policy of 1986 for education programmes to play "a positive, interventionist role" in nurturing women's equality. The programme was called Mahila Samakhya : Mahila means women, and Samakhya is a compound of the Sanskrit words "sama" meaning equal, and "akhya" meaning to be valued or weighed. Its unique feature is that it is an autonomous registered society, which gives it the flexibility to respond to field realities allowing it to function more like an NGO than a government department.

Mahila Samakhya Karnataka is a process project which is not merely target oriented. While the focus is on quality, quantity is not compromised. Since its inception in 1989, expansion has taken place at the rate of three districts per plan period. Today MS is in nine districts of Karnataka namely, Bellary, Bidar, Bijapur, Bagalkot, Gulbarga, Mysore, Raichur, Koppal and Chamrajnagar.

The concept of federations is futuristic and aimed at sustaining a grassroots women’s movement that Mahila Samakhya Karnataka (MSK) has initiated. Inherent within this concept is the need to build into the movement its future sustainability, to empower women’s organizations at all levels (village, block, district and state) and to create a force by which women can successfully negotiate with other institutions on their own terms. This study is aimed therefore at assessing where the federations were at by tracing its history, the activities, asking women to assess the achievements and performance of the federation and finally at arriving at capacity building needs as defined by the women primarily and secondly from the perspective of MSK staff.

1. Objectives and Scope of the Study

The research conducted was to assess the current performance and status of the federations and the capacity building needed for their sustainability after MSK withdraws. MSK has a clear perspective on what the federation’s functions should be:

- The federations should take over the role of MSK as it withdraws and continue to sustain the movement for women’s equality
- The federations should act as a pressure group to support the sanghas at the taluka, district and state levels.
- The federations should play a networking role with government programmes.

There was a need to design a strategy to support and strengthen the federations. This study was undertaken to provide information towards the overall goal of strengthening the existing federations of Mahila Samakhya Karnataka.

Within this overall framework it was decided that the study would examine the following:

- The process, history of the federations, and the future concept of the federations.
- An assessment from the perspective of women and staff of the current performance and activities of the federations.
- A participatory analysis with the women to surface for themselves what they perceive as capacity building needs and prioritize these needs to help bring out the overall needs across districts and variations between districts.
- A participatory analysis with the women to understand the role of federations vis-à-vis different institutions, the functions that these institutions perform important to the federations and surface the capacity building needs of the federations towards better dealing with those institutions and specific functions.

2. Methodology and Limitations of the Study

In the spirit of empowering federations, the methodology adopted by the study was a participatory one, involving visual exercises (as a substitute to standard surveys) for each of the study components which could help women assess for themselves the federations' performance visually through voting and prioritizing their capacity building needs. This methodology was also designed to raise the capacities of MSK staff to further conduct similar exercises where ongoing and future assessment is needed.

The focus group discussions and the reflection sessions brought to light the dynamics of the federation, their concerns and achievements. A set of pre-determined questions (which came out of the two pilot studies) guided these discussions. Each federation was divided into groups representative of the General Body (representatives of the six committees), Executive Committee and representatives from the Nari Adalat. The study was divided in two sections. An in-depth study of one federation in each district and a workshop with members from all the federations of the district. Altogether 630 women participated in the study.

Three exercises were conducted. The first being Capacity Building Prioritization with the objective of providing quantitative evidence of the women's priorities and needs for training for the future sustainability of the federation. The second exercise was Performance Assessment to understand how members perceive the current performance of the federation on select functions. The third exercise was designed for the Executive Committee members only to analyse institutions where they were asked to envision how they wanted certain key institutions to function in the future, list the important functions of different institutions that they would like to link to and then list the capacity building required to link to those functions.

This study would therefore serve as a base line to assess future progress, and the future, constantly changing needs of the federations, which at the present moment are very young and need the same type of nurturing that the sanghas formed by MSK almost ten years ago received.

This study had certain limitations, which include the time taken that did not allow more than a one-time assessment of the federations' needs and performance. This provides a snap shot picture of the federations at a particular moment in time and does not capture the entire process and the federation's needs on an on-going basis. Since the focus of the study was to assess the current capacity building needs it captured only in brief the various other dimensions such as strategies used in the past by staff. An attempt was made to correct this with one focus group discussion with the staff to understand these strategies at the end of the study. While a serious attempt was made to understand the goals and perspectives of the organization, as outsiders, there were limitations on how much of these perspectives could be fully understood. Thus this study definitely can provide an understanding of the federations from an outside perspective, at best.

3. Major Findings

This study has been conducted right at the inception stages of the federation's formation. Furthermore it provides practitioners with a set of methodological tools for participatory monitoring and assessment. Preliminary results are listed below.

3.1 Overall Assessment

Women's overall assessment of the federations showed fairly consistent voting patterns on all functions. (See Chart 5.1 and Table 5.1. for actual number of votes) with a majority (about 2/3rds) of the 630 women who voted and rated the performance of the federation on all functions as having achieved 25 percent (between 222-253 votes) or 50 percent (between 161-214 votes) of its goals.

These ratings are realistic because the federations are extremely young with some as old as three months while the oldest federation is about three years old. Thus with most federations having been in existence for a year or less this assessment is a realistic one and serves as a base line for what may appear a full fledged self evaluation when the federations are a few years old and have achieved some maturity.

3.2 Function Needing the Most Inputs:

The function that was identified as needing the most input was helping sanghas negotiate with external institutions in their villages such as the Gram Panchayats, Primary Health Centers and so on followed by linkages to government programmes. Among various functions the federation's capacity to act as a pressure group got the highest number of votes, indicating comparatively better performance on this aspect.

3.3. District Variation

Table 3.1: Functions Needing the Most Input: District Wise	
<i>District</i>	<i>Function Needing the Most Inputs</i>
Bidar	Formation of new sanghas
Koppal	Capacity to solve sangha problems vis a vis external institutions in the village
Bellary	Capacity to solve sangha problems vis a vis external institutions in the village followed by financial sustainability
Mysore	Ability to create linkages to government programmes followed by capacity to solve sangha problems vis a vis external institutions in the village
Raichur	Formation of sanghas
Gulbarga	Capacity to solve sangha problems vis a vis external institutions in the village
Bijapur	Ability to create linkages to government programmes

Bijapur showed the lowest ratings as these have some of the youngest federations. Mysore showed relatively high ratings as these are the oldest federations.

- As can be seen the federation's capacity to solve sangha problems vis-à-vis external institutions in the village got the lowest ratings in four of the seven districts. This follows the overall ratings.
- Variations in district priorities however are also seen.

3.2. Variation by Group

Table 3.2: Functions Needing the Most Input: Group Wise	
District	Function Needing the Most Inputs
General Body	Capacity to solve sangha problems vis a vis external institutions in the village followed by the federations ability to solve legal cases
Executive Committee	Federation's capacity to build government programmes linkages and form new sanghas

This shows the distinctly different priorities of the Executive Committee and of the General Body of the federations.

4. Capacity Building Needs

- The over riding priority identified by all women was literacy (See Table 4.1).
- The second priority was legal literacy.
- The third most important priority was learning how to access government programmes.

District	Institutional rankings		
	Priority 1	Priority 2	Priority 3
Bidar	Literacy	Management of the Nari Adalat	Learning how to access government programmes
Koppal	Legal Literacy	Learning how to access government programmes	Management of the Nari Adalat
Bellary	Literacy	Legal Literacy	Management of the Nari Adalat
Mysore	Learning how to access government programmes & Financial management	Legal Literacy	Management of the Nari Adalat EDP training Federation management
Raichur	Communication skills	Literacy	Legal Literacy
Gulbarga	Literacy	Legal Literacy	Leadership skills
Bijapur	Literacy	Legal Literacy	Learning how to access government programmes

Again district specific capacity building needs and priorities emerge from the prioritization exercises conducted by women.

- Literacy and legal literacy emerge as the most important priorities.
- Learning how to access government programmes and management of the Nari Adalat are the next most commonly listed needs.
- Special priorities that emerge that deserve mention are communication skills in Raichur and financial management in Mysore in the first priority rankings.
- Mysore having the most mature federations shows a larger variation in capacity building needs than any other district.

5. Institutional Analysis

The institution assigned the first priority in terms of the importance given by the maximum number of women across all districts turned out to be Mahila Samakhya (43.6 percent), followed by Panchayati Raj institutions (15.7 percent).

5.1. District Variation

District	Institutional rankings		
	Priority 1	Priority 2	Other Priorities*
Bidar	MSK	Panchayati Raj	Nari Adalat School Banks Other SHGs
Koppal	MSK	Panchayati Raj	Santwana Banks PHC

Bellary	MSK	Panchayati Raj	Police
Mysore	MSK	Panchayati Raj	Nari Adalat Police Tehsildar Banks
Raichur	MSK	Panchayati Raj Nari Adalat	PHC Police
Gulbarga	MSK	Banks	Federation Schools Panchayati Raj institutions The Nari Adalat
Bijapur	Nari Adalat	Banks	Panchayati Raj institutions

*This priority is when an institution is mentioned in four or five priority areas

Here each district shows distinctly different priorities with reference to institutional roles. Gulbarga and Bijapur show the most differences. All districts seem to prioritize MSK and Panchayati Raj institutions. However, each district seems to prioritize different institutions in its third and fourth rankings and in the most commonly mentioned institutions.

The capacity building needs associated with each institution and associated function listed as important are too detailed to summarize here and can be referred to in the chapter on capacity building needs in the main report.

6. The Future Vision of the Federation

The DPCs and women were interviewed to surface the future vision of the federations. The main thrust of the thinking throughout all districts was aimed at making the federations and their work sustainable in the absence of MSK. Stated below are views and recommendations:

6.1 Sustainability

MSK should give training and wait till their support is not needed any more before they withdraw.ⁱ The women should be given every possible input to be prepared to respond and act on all women's issues before MSK withdraws. All government department correspondence presently comes to MSK. The federation should be directly linked to the government departments and all correspondence channeled through the federation. Presently in Bellary there are no sahyoginis in two ghatakas. In the remaining three ghatakas the sahyogini should withdraw and the Executive Committee should do the sahyoginis work at the taluk level. MSK is now working like an informal helpline but the federation should take up this role.ⁱⁱ

ⁱ DPC, Gulbarga

ⁱ DPC, Mysore
DPC, Bellary

The federations have to recognise where the gapsⁱⁱⁱ are. They have to network the sanghas to the taluk and district level agencies. The federation being in contact with¹ other federations is a MSK concept, which is where they want to strengthen the Zilla level federation.

The DPC in Raichur said she created a federation in Belgaum which became literate as they had to be independent financially and in terms of documentation. They should be able to take on organizational roles. The federation should take on MSK's role of making every woman literate and give them knowledge on all issues. The DPC said, "We, as staff, need to generate an awareness of the issues and give them inputs so they can take the struggle forward, where the impetus comes from within them".

According to the staff in Bidar^{iv}, the federation should have an office at the taluk level where it performs all MSK's current functions such as provide training, communicate with government offices, among other functions. If MSK becomes a resource center there may not be enough staff to handle the work and this can be managed if women can confidently carry out these responsibilities.

Financial Sustainability^v: Currently MSK is financing the federations but when MSK withdraws the federations have to finance themselves. They were told that after 2002 MSK would cease to be present. So the federations started collecting funds through membership fees of 21-25 rupees which amounts to about Rs.10,000 to Rs.12,000 a year approximately, which they estimated was needed to sustain federation activities. The two main costs are food and travel related. As of now the sangha is bearing the cost of the food and MSK is bearing the travel costs.

6.2 Bringing Out Women's Voices: Intervene In Decision Making Bodies

Government departments should plan and strategize with the woman's interests in mind. Presently all plans are based mainly on the interests of men. The government should first meet the federation members and find out the women's needs. Planning should be from bottom to top.

6.3 Credit Linkages

There is an attitude on the part of the bank officers that the women are generally incapable and inferior to men reflecting a gender bias. There is a need to change this. One way is to open a Mahila Bank. A second is to link existing banks and their programmes to women's groups via the federation.

6.4 Spreading the Movement

All sanghas and SHGs should come under the MSK federation and form a movement for women.^{vi} Through the federation the women can join other SHGs, other federations and work together.^{vii} Social movements should move to the state level. When policies are

being discussed at the national or state levels, the federation members should be consulted. The federation should be recognised and respected the way MSK is now.

In villages where MSK is not working the federation should take on those villages in terms of spreading the movement and forming sanghas and new federations. The federation should be trained to take on this role.

In this spread of the movement, one principle that should be kept in mind is that if women are first sensitized on gender, violence, leadership, panchayat elections, and so on the women get more empowered. EDP and credit should be introduced after these inputs are given. The federations need to be funded so as to perform these functions in this order.

The movement should also be sustained over time and over generations. Kishoris should be given more attention^{viii}. This can be done through the federation. Kishoris need camps on relevant issues and on gender. Only school education is not enough they also need role modeling through plays and exposure visits.

Informally the sangha and federation can monitor Anganwadi and hospital activities and become more aware citizens.

6.5 The Federation as a Women's Center, an Information and Education Center^{ix}

Once the federations are strengthened the women can come to them for information, to share problems or to look for solutions. This information center can also work like a rural education center which can provide adult literacy and can provide non-formal education to school drop-outs. NGOs work in these areas but there is no continuity. The center will ensure continuity, which should be the responsibility of the federation.

Gender issues and violence can be handled through the women's center by the federation. Women will be given training and awareness on a continuous basis because the women tend to get distracted when a government program or economic activity comes along. This will function like the 'helpline' or through the Nari Adalat. The women can come and register their complaints verbally. The complaints can be followed up by a mobile unit on similar lines as the Nari Adalat. There should be some educated and trained sangha women (trained in issues such as gender, leadership, etc.) in the federation to answer the queries of new women who either want to join the movement or need to deal with a problem.

Staff in Bidar^x added to this perspective saying in the resource center there should be a research center, which carries out work for women. There should be documents about the findings of researchers.

6.6 Ensuring Justice for Women

The aim would be to have more forums where women can get justice. In Gulbarga for example, the goal is to start Nari Adalats at the taluka level, where it is already functional at the district level. Towards this goal some women have already been selected in Aland and Chittapur. The Nari Adalat members should have leadership qualities and the knowledge on how to solve disputes. Wherever there is violence against women, the women themselves can go to the spot and resolve the issue. Presently the Nari Adalat functions up to the level of the police station but they do not have the expertise to follow up on cases which have gone to court. This expertise is required. Under the government Free Legal Aid programmes, the lawyers are paid but do not necessarily win cases for women. The Nari Adalat should act as a pressure group to influence lawyers to genuinely fight cases and get justice for women. Presently the Free Legal Aid programme invites the DPC for functions whereas it should invite the Nari Adalat and federation women instead. Lawyers try to delay the opening of Lok Adalats. The Nari Adalat and federation could act as a pressure group to open more Lok Adalats to solve women's problems.

6.7 Future Expectations of the Women

Past research experience has shown that surfacing participatory indicators with women need sufficient time and reflection and needs to take place more than once. The time required for more than a one-time assessment was not factored into the methodology of this study. Instead women found it more useful to talk about their future expectations from the federation which included the following:

- Form a federation office
- Access resources for women and the community through the federation
- Strengthen the movement by forming more sanghas and eventually to start forming mahasanghas
- Help women start economic activities and marketing through the federation
- Empower more and more women
- Generate income for women through providing them access to credit
- Fine tune the by-laws of the federation

6.8 Indicators of Strength of the Federations

Some indicators of strength of the federation as outlined by MSK staff include:

- Active Executive Committee
- Regular meetings and regular committee meetings
- Independent financial management and transactions
- A feeling of ownership of the federation
- Should be self reliant in documentation and record keeping
- Ability of the federations to approach government offices independently and solve problems.
- Independence in decision making

- People bring their problems to the federations increasing the scope and range of problems solved in the federation
- Active dissemination of information
- Federation takes up an issue and has the capacity to see it through till the end
- In villages where there is no sangha the federation should be recognized

7. Conclusions and Recommendations

This report shows clearly the needs and priorities of the women and staff. Despite some broad overriding trends, variations across districts must be noted while designing the capacity building programmes.

- The General Body's lowest ratings were for the federation's capacity to solve external problems vis-à-vis institutions at the village level and the federation's ability to solve legal cases.
- The Executive Committee of the federations however had different priorities as the EC's lowest ratings were for the federation's capacity to build linkages to government programmes and form new sanghas.
- The General Body members prioritized literacy first, then legal literacy and third learning how to access government programmes. Executive Committee members prioritized literacy, then Nari Adalat management and third learning how to access government programmes.
- The institution that was the first priority by the maximum number of women across all districts turned out to be Mahila Samakhya, followed by Panchayati Raj.

The next set of recommendations listed below stem from a collective reflection exercise with staff.

- *Economic development activities* has emerged as a demand from the ground from women that is influenced by and responding to global trends. Any response or strategy has to be well thought through. Therefore it is recommended that the work done by other institutions on economic development and the lessons learnt therein be reviewed and taken into consideration so that MSK does not have to reinvent the wheel or repeat the mistakes made by others. Some initiatives developed by other organizations focus on economic development initiatives and producer /marketing societies which teach women to access markets and negotiation skills using women's organizations at larger levels to bargain on price related issues. In this context an in depth training and exposure for staff is first needed before any strategy is evolved. Economic development was discussed in depth by staff in the reflection session on the findings of the study. One thing that emerged clearly in the Executive Committee capacity building workshop in Koppal was that the mahasangha was registered as a society and the by-laws of

the federations do not allow economic activities for profit. However the village level sangha is completely empowered to conduct economic activities and earn profits. The mahasangha can act as a mediator and negotiator for the sanghas. Therefore federations can provide the sanghas the support they need to initiate economic activities but not receive profits itself.

- *Decentralization of Financial Management to the Federation:* On financial management, earlier in some instances there was mishandling of funds by some women in the federation and by some staff at the district level. Hence while the women continue to be the signatories, MSK at the district level retains the power to authorize the release of funds. This is only an interim measure to build trust. However in the long term it is recommended that decentralization of financial management take place where the federation independently handles the finances and takes complete responsibility for its finances.
- *Decentralization of Decision Making to the Federation:* This has to be an obvious next step which in fact is already a priority area with MSK. Here the sahayoginis need to start the withdrawal process in areas where the sanghas or the federations are strong enough to take over. It would imply that federation members initially accompany sahayoginis in their meetings with the intention of taking over responsibilities from the sahayoginis who in turn would slowly reduce their visits and level of involvement. A parallel intervention would include capacity building assessment through observing the capabilities and the difficulties experienced by federation members in taking over the roles of sahayoginis and designing capacity building programmes based on these observations.
- *Financial Concerns for the Federation:* Professional accounting mechanisms are needed to handle federation accounts and documentation to deal with financial management. The Executive Committee and Nari Adalat members should be paid for the services that they render for women. Payment for services rendered is important for the work to be sustainable since it involves countering built in financial disincentives such as losing daily wages compounded by travel expenses incurred by the EC and Nari Adalat members.
- *Training:* Training for federations emerged as a priority. Training manuals to provide inputs on all issues need to be prioritized. Core responsibility for the training manual from conception to completion should be assigned to a small team who have the skills to work to develop the manuals. The first priority identified was literacy. The second training concern is to do with training on legal issues for the Nari Adalat to do its work more effectively where sangha women need to know the type of evidence the Nari Adalat needs for the different types of cases they handle. The third priority was for information on accessing government programmes.

- *Monitoring federation growth:* There is a need for on-going monitoring systems at the state and district levels to ensure federation growth and timely inputs. This monitoring can help assess the inputs given in the past and also surface new inputs required in a timely manner. This is especially clear given the fact that the training needs demanded by women varied from district to district.

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- ⁱ DPC, Bellary
 - ⁱⁱ DPC, Gulbarga
 - ⁱⁱⁱ DPC, Mysore
 - ^{iv} DPC, Bidar
 - ^v DPC, Mysore
 - ^{vi} DPC, Bijapur
 - ^{vii} DPC, Gulbarga
 - ^{viii} DPC, Gulbarga
 - ^{ix} DPC, Gulbarga
 - ^x DPC, Bidar