

WOMEN'S RIGHTS AND EMPOWERMENT

*Sanghas and Women's Federations
Partners for Women and Girls' Empowerment*

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Mahila Samakhya, a programme of the Ministry of Human Resource Development working in ten states, towards empowering women and adolescent girls through education has, over the years, built a large, robust base of women's collectives at various levels. These collectives, called **Sanghas**, of women at the village level are networked into **Federations** at the cluster, block and often at district levels.



Why are Federations important?

Sangha-Federations are grassroots women's organisations in which:

- Women are seen as an embodiment of knowledge, the source of collective strength and as change agents working towards a gender-just society rather than just as individual beneficiaries of welfare schemes.
- The focus is women's rights, voice and collective empowerment. The approach is bottom up and is accountable to Sanghas and their issues.
- Members are articulate, energetic and leaders in their own right, capable of challenging patriarchal norms that undermine the intrinsic progress and dignity of women.

Ministry of Women and Child Development (MWCD) and Federations: Possibilities for Partnership

Ministry Priorities and Contributions of Federations:

- **Promote Social Empowerment of Women:** Federations play an important role in mobilizing grassroots women; preventing social evils such as child marriage, trafficking, devdasi system; and mitigating violence against women in their families and communities.
- **Create awareness of women's rights to facilitate institutional support:** Federations conduct awareness drives on social causes such as ill-effects of alcoholism, dowry, domestic violence and sensitize communities on gender equality. They act as a resource group to develop a gender perspective in government and non-government institutions. They also provide informal justice forums for women in the form of *Nari Adalats*.
- **Holistic development of children:** Federations employ multiple strategies for overall development of girls. They run residential courses, community learning centres as bridge courses for drop out girls, and conduct campaigns to promote school enrolment. They encourage adolescent collectives to develop future leaders.



POLICY MESSAGES FOR MINISTRY OF WOMEN AND CHILD DEVELOPMENT

1. Recognise rights-based women's collectives as grassroots partners for women's issues

Partnering with grassroots women's collectives for the design and implementation of MWCD programmes can increase their effectiveness.

2. Promote synergies with rights- based women's collectives to implement pro-women Acts

Federations can create awareness on legal rights, act as watch dogs to ensure their implementation, and run informal justice forums for women to obtain gender justice.

3. Recognize federations as building blocks for women's holistic development

Institutionalize mobilization, monitoring and community oversight initiatives of federations, which can be built into partnership and synergy efforts as well as into WCD programmes.

Challenges for the Ministry of Women and Child Development

All programmes under the MWCD aim at raising awareness of women and children, as well as of the community, leading to changes in practices with respect to health, nutrition, dignity, self-confidence, and women's leadership. Complementing these programmes are the enabling laws that help the department enforce normative behaviour.

However, the ministry has to deal with some challenges to achieve these objectives including: poor literacy levels among women, lack of access to information, social-caste-gender barriers, lack of women and girls' leadership and support systems, poor social oversight for better accountability, and non-transparency in service delivery systems. Most of these interventions are supply driven (providing nutrition and medicines) with limited scope to identify needs and demands in a robust way.

Challenge 1: Lack of affordable, accessible, gender sensitive justice forums for women

Women from rural, marginalized communities are victims of patriarchy, which leads to various forms of injustice and oppression. The voicelessness of these women is a result of illiteracy, poverty, poor access to affordable, efficient justice delivery systems, and the lack of support systems within the family or community. Thus, the need for woman friendly forums becomes essential.

Solution 1.1: Promote Informal Justice Delivery Forums for women

Nari Adalats are a revolutionary, community-based mechanism, where justice is delivered at the doorstep of women through the wide reach of the *Sanghas* and Federations. These informal judicial systems, located in the community, are affordable, accessible, and run by women, who are sensitised to gender inequalities in society. These forums resolve cases through mutual consultation and ensure execution of agreements through the *Sanghas*. Since these are run by women from their own community, the clients are able to express their problems without any fear - see Box 1. If the Nari Adalat programme is formally recognized by the MWCD, then more women in the country will be in a position to access justice, which will increase gender equity, gender justice, and ensure women a life of dignity.

Solution 1.2: Promote Legal Committees within women's collectives

Although several legislations have been enforced to protect women, the biggest obstacle lies in the lack of awareness of these legislations among the women who need it the most. Moreover, marginalised women are not able to ensure enforcement of these Acts on their own and would benefit immensely from the strength of the collective. When it comes to enforcement of legal rights, legal committees within women's groups are a possible solution.

Regular capacity building on legislation increases the awareness and ability of women to address gender justice issues in a systematic manner within village communities, and where necessary, emerge as pressure groups at higher levels. Federations being networks, provide the right opportunity for legal committees to act and liaise with local police stations and panchayats for their support.

Box 1: The Nari Adalat

An innovation of Mahila Samakhya (MS), the Nari Adalat emerged as a grassroots response from the *Sanghas*, to the rise in violence against women (VAW). The Nari Adalat is a decentralized, gender sensitive forum which addresses VAW issues and helps women access their rights as citizens. This alternative system of social justice for women, embedded in the *Sanghas* and federations, operates as an informal, conciliatory, non-adversarial social network to help the poor, especially victims of violence, realise their constitutional rights. They handle cases of domestic violence, dowry, divorce, rape and abandonment. Their members are trained in legislation relevant to women and are oriented on gender issues. They utilise several strategies to resolve their cases:

- Mutual consultation with different parties
- Verification of facts
- Gathering community support for the victim
- Acting as pressure groups with federation support
- Networking with police, gram panchayat, and government officials for support in case resolution
- Entering into formal agreements with different stakeholders along with witnesses
- Following up through *Sanghas* to ensure execution of agreements

Impact

In the nine states where MS operates, 184 Nari Adalats at block level have handled 6,068 cases in 2009-10 alone. The Gujarat government has already announced its intention to form a Nari Adalat in every block. The Nari Adalat plays a vital role in the grassroots execution, enforcement and awareness of Acts like the Domestic Violence Act and the Marriage Registration Act. Most importantly, they act as accessible forums for women to seek justice. Hosted within the federations, the Nari Adalats have been able to deal with power structures within the community to deliver gender justice.



Solution 1.3: Promote state sponsored counselling centres and help-lines

State sponsored counselling centres with legal and psychological counsellors at block level are seen as a critical recourse for women in distress. The accessibility to these centres through help-lines, further ensure that support can be given immediately. The presence of legal counsellors provides women guidance on how to deal with their issues legally while the social counsellors provide relief to women in the face of problems. This model has been very successful in the state of Karnataka through initiatives like Santhwana and Sindhuvani programmes. The combination of these centres with the Nari Adalat has been a very successful model of justice delivery and community support. If the presence of federation members is made mandatory in counselling centres, presently established at police stations, their functioning can be made more gender sensitive and can provide better outreach. Gender justice can be ensured only if federation members, who have a strong gender perspective, are involved in the decision making in resolving cases related to women.

Challenge 2: Empowerment of adolescent girls

Disempowerment of adolescent girls happens at different levels, which denies girls of their basic rights. Gender discrimination at the family level, often excludes girls from the educational systems and is further deepened by the notion that girls are to be married off as early as possible.

Child marriage not only deprives girls of education but also leads to early pregnancies and abandonment, which are detrimental to their overall development. Moreover, deeply embedded patriarchal notions within the family and society further enhance the discrimination against girls.

Solution 2.1: Promote adolescent collectives

The Kishori Mancha (Box 2) is an offshoot of the Mahila Sanghas where adolescent girls meet as a collective. Through these forums, girls develop awareness about their rights and even start taking action against social evils, with the help of the sanghas. These forums are vital in creating a second generation sensitive to gender issues, aware of their rights, and with the ability to challenge patriarchy. These groups can also include boys, as seen in Andhra Pradesh Mahila Samakhya, where Bal Sanghams are formed and gender sensitisation conducted for both boys and girls to inculcate notions of gender equality among them.

Solution 2.2: Promote partnerships with gender sensitive community based organisations

Federations, which have been created with a strong rights based approach, with clear objectives of women's empowerment, can act as grassroots partners to help the WCD meet its goal of holistic development of women and children. SABLA, the latest scheme under WCD designed to empower adolescent girls through training in life skills, vocational exposure and the provision of nutritional supplements can easily be linked with the existing models of Youth Groups (Kishori Sangha, Kishori Mancha, Bala Sangham), run through Sanghas and federations who can act as NGO Partners, as specified in the scheme.

Federations are already engaged in rehabilitating sexually abused girls and victims of domestic violence and try to provide shelter to them on their own accord. They even manage Mahila Shikshan Kendras in several states independently and are equipped to take charge of Short Stay Homes, Juvenile Homes, Adolescent Homes, and Children's Homes run by WCD as NGO partners.

Moreover, federations play a critical role in creating awareness in the community on issues like child marriage and girls' education and can partner with WCD for this purpose. In Andhra Pradesh, in the year 2008-09 alone, federations were able to enrol 7,078 children in school and prevent 334 early marriages, through planned campaigns, community mobilisation and follow up.



Box 2: Kishori Mancha

The Kishori Mancha is a forum for adolescent girls which includes both school going, drop outs and never-enrolled girls. They meet regularly in their own villages to discuss issues, with MS providing inputs on child rights, gender sensitization, vocational training, life skills, health, and nutrition,

There exists a symbiotic relationship between the Kishori Manchas, Sanghas and federations. Kishoris receive leadership and life-skill training from Sanghas and MS staff. Kishori Manchas and Sanghas work together for campaigns against child marriage, alcoholism, prevention of girl child trafficking and other social causes.

The main impact of Kishori Mancha is an increased awareness among girls about their rights which include the right to education, freedom of speech, of mobility, the right to lead a free life, and to get an equal share of food in the family. Girls are aware of the ill effects of child marriage, child labour and other forms of discrimination. Kishori Manchas have taken proactive steps to prevent child marriages in the community, reduced child labour, and enrolled children in schools, in some cases providing financial support where necessary. Some of the roles initially played by the Sanghas have now been shifted to Kishori Manchas.

Overall Policy Messages

Sanghas and Federations have the requisite strength, scale, and quality to be an equal partner in social change. Being a rights-based, grassroots, democratic women's organisation, the Sanghas and federations are best suited to partner with MWCD to ensure women's rights, and their participation in governance and development. These federations, built on democratic principles, have evolved as non-hierarchical structures that can ensure transparent, participatory and decentralized functioning thus reaching out to large numbers of marginalized women. In recognition of the need to universalize this approach across the country, a number of corollaries emerge:

1. Recognize rights-based, women's collectives as grassroots partners for women's issues

Partnerships between WCD and women's federations, working on women's needs, social dignity, issues of gender, women's participation in governance, and legal rights will ensure that the programmes initiated by the WCD will reach the most marginalized and poorest of women. These federations can provide valuable inputs in programme design, making them relevant to the lives of women and children. Structural links between the WCD and Federations can lead to several welcome results, a) Stronger awareness and therefore demand built for ICDS services, b) Better enforcement of Acts related to women, c) Leadership development of women and girls, d) Social reform towards gender justice, and e) Enhancement of the value of girls in the family and society. This could take the form of partnerships where WCD could support:

- Federations to act as resource groups to raise awareness of women's rights and provide information on ICDS services.
- Federations to run Kishori Manchas to empower adolescent girls through SABLA, providing gender education, legal rights, life-skills, and vocational exposure to non traditional occupations.

2. Promote synergies with rights-based women's collectives to implement pro-women Acts

Synergy between the WCD and federations can lead to improved monitoring and implementation of pro-women Acts, especially through supporting and institutionalizing the Nari Adalats. The District Social Welfare Officer (the district wing of WCD) is responsible for enforcing Acts relevant to women such as the Dowry Prohibition Act (1962), the Domestic Violence Act (2005), and the Prevention of Child Marriage Act (2006). Federations can perform the role of watchdogs in the community for better implementation of these Acts . Moreover, federations also play a critical role in running campaigns to raise awareness in the community on these legislations.

3. Recognize federations as building blocks for women's holistic development

The real strength of federations lies in their ability to mobilize women and girls, act as pressure groups, monitor and bring the various programme gaps to the notice of government, advocate women's and girls' issues with formal authorities, and conduct popular advocacy to combat traditional patriarchal forces. These federations have hosted several innovations which are critical to women, like the Nari Adalat for gender justice, Panchayat literacy programmes to mobilize women into governance, community learning centres to mainstream girls into regular schools. The WCD could recognize federations as building blocks for women's holistic development that:

- Open doors for women to negotiate and obtain support from government and non-government organisations for activities and innovations that empower women and girls.
- Institutionalize mobilization, monitoring and community oversight initiatives of federations, which can be built into the partnership and synergy efforts and WCD programmes.

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