

WOMEN'S MOBILISATION AND PROGRAMME AGENDAS

The Mahila Sangha or Mahila Samooh is the focal point in each village, that will provide the space where women can meet, be together, and begin the process of reflecting, asking questions, speaking fearlessly, thinking, analysing and above all feeling confident to articulate their needs through this collective.

These groups have provided the collective strength for women, usually from poor & marginalized groups, to overcome barriers to their participation in and access to education and development. As a collective they have the strength to overcome obstacles and to articulate demands for themselves and their daughters, which individually they are unable to do.

The process of mobilising and organising women is done by a sahayogini who looks after 10 villages. This is not an easy process since the programme does not have any tangible services or benefits to offer. The process of

rapport building is done through regular visits, gaining the confidence and faith of the women, listening to what the women have to say and enabling them to clearly articulate their problems. Often the sahayogini assists the women to resolve small problems during the course of which the need for women's collectives and the role they can play in ensuring a better quality of life for the women and their families is stressed. In this context then, a variety of issues are raised by the women. These issues inform the formulation of programme strategies and interventions.

Making the System Work

When Sangha women in Karnataka learnt that scholarships are given to tribal students, they asked the teacher about the modalities. Initially, he resisted their queries; later he asked male members of the students' families to come and collect the scholarship. He also deducted Rs.5/- from each one's scholarship. Sangha women protested and insisted that he purchase a dholak, a wall clock and another musical instrument from the collected fund. They also checked the receipt of the purchase made.

The sangha then ensured that the scholarships were given in full to the mother of the students. Now, the Sangha women are invited for school functions and the flag hoisting ceremony.

Consequently, the programme has responded to the needs of the women which range from, educational demands, livelihood and health concerns, accessing resources, participation in panchayati raj, to gender problems.

PARTNERS IN LEARNING

The Bala Mitra Kendras (Non-formal Education centres) were started in Andhra Pradesh as a bridge to sending girls to formal schools. These kendras are for girls in the 10+ age group, who are working either at home or outside.

The issue of parental responsibility towards children's education, especially girls, was discussed in a sustained manner in all interactions. We hoped to translate ideas like partnership and ownership of a programme into a reality. The teacher's honorarium was calculated at Rs.10 per month per child. And this is shared as follows:

Sangham contribution from its fund	Rs. 1
Parents of the girl to contribute	Rs. 3
APMSS contribution	Rs. 6
TOTAL	Rs. 10

(Of the APMSS contribution of Rs.6, only Rs.3 would be given to the teacher every month and the balance amount of Rs.3 is linked to the MLL achievement of the child, which is assessed once every three months) This payment to the teacher is paid through the sangham.

Sanghams and parents are playing an active role in monitoring the kendras. They are ensuring that the teachers are regular and report any difficulties that they encounter. The Sanghams in Mahabubnagar removed teachers of 7 kendras because they were irregular.

Sanghas in all the States have taken initiatives to address wide ranging issues/problems such as:

- Struggling for equal and minimum wages
- Improving civic amenities
- Health of women and children
- Actively accessing resources from DWCRA, DRDA, DPAP, Forest dept etc
- Ensuring educational opportunities for their children especially girls.
- Entering the political sphere through election to panchayati raj bodies
- Articulating their concerns and tackling social issues like violence against women, child marriage
- Seeking and obtaining literacy and numeracy skills for themselves and their children

The outcomes of this process have been:

- A demand for literacy and education for children especially for girls has been generated; Educational inputs - AE, NFE, Vocational Training, Support Services, Mahila Shikshan Kendra, DRU & ECCE Centres are introduced in a phased manner, responding to the needs of the

programme.

- accessing facilities like hostels, scholarships, etc

- recognition and visibility within the family, community and block levels has increased -- leadership qualities have been developed and a cadre of village level organisers and activists are emerging

BREAKING BARRIERS

The MS programme in Banda district, UP has effectively demonstrated the ability of poor and illiterate women to master technology and move from strength to strength. Scarcity of water was the issue around which poor women of SCs/STs and Kol communities were enabled to break the technology barrier.

Overcoming caste hierarchies, social ridicule and official cynicism, the women mastered difficult terminology and learnt the technical aspects, remembering through songs which they orally constructed as they went along. For the women becoming mechanics was more than acquiring a skill or redressing a need, it was a continuous process of struggle and self assertion in their families and communities. The success in Banda has inspired similar efforts in AP and Gujarat. In Banda, the issue of water led to recognition of the need to learn to read and write. Moving from pictorial odes to letters, a team of handpump mechanics and sahayoginis have learnt screen printing, material production and now write, design and produce a popular and widely acclaimed broad-sheet called the "Mahila Dakiya".

- the strength and ability to demand accountability of government delivery systems has been demonstrated
- Sanghas have taken decisions to postpone the age of marriage of their daughters and have actively prevented child marriages taking place in their villages.
- In states like Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh sanghas have ensured that no girl is initiated as a jogini in their villages.
- In Uttar Pradesh and Gujarat, Sakhis and sahayoginis have received intensive training in laws relating to women and have started Nari Adalats/ Mahila Panch, which are informal courts run by women.

Programme interventions have included innovative programmes . Some examples are:

- In Banda, UP, women trained as handpump mechanics became literate via the language of handpump maintenance.
- Region specific curricula have been developed around the concerns of women like violence, health and herbal medicine, wages, environment, forests among many others.
- Women have begun to effectively address the issues of girl child education in addition to their own education. Sanghas are active partners in the diverse educational initiatives of the programme. The ECCE centers in Gujarat, the **Bala Mitra Kendras, Jagjagi Centres** (NFE) for girls in Andhra Pradesh and Bihar, the **Udan Khatolas** in UP all provide a creative learning opportunity. Sanghas assist in selecting teachers, monitoring the centers, mobilizing the

community for education and in some cases (as in Andhra Pradesh) make some financial contribution as well.

- An innovative initiative in the area of girls/ women's education has been the **Mahila Shikshan Kendras**. These are residential courses, aimed at developing a pool of aware, trained and literate women at the village level. The curricula followed is diverse ranging from a curriculum developed in partnership with the learners, imparting life skills, skill development to enabling the learners to join the mainstream education system. The MSK has been able to draw in girls and young adults who for a variety of reasons do not benefit from the usual schools/ AS centers. The demand for these Kendras is on the rise.
- In many districts, MS is publishing newspapers/ broad-sheets. The popularity of these papers among the neo literate women is immense and these newspapers enjoy a large circulation. In fact some districts in UP & Assam have now made these priced publications.

While the direct impact of the MS educational strategy is yet to be fully felt, its impact is most visible in the confidence with which Sanghas are playing an active role in village education committees, making schools work, ensuring the teachers come regularly and in many instances ensuring that in their villages, children, particularly girl children, have access to formal education.

This has not been a linear process of learning and empowerment. There have been many crests and troughs, several steps backwards before a step could be taken forward. The zest and drive of the women has kept the programme vibrant. How will these learning processes be sustained in the long run? This is the challenge.

From the programmatic point of view, the major feeling has been that the empowerment process, must enable Sanghas to play an independent role without depending on paid MS personnel such as Sahyoginis. While this point of view has, in principle, gained acceptance within the programme, the question of the methodology is now the focus of discussion.

It is clear that the methodology that would be followed would be different for different districts, who have followed different paths in the programme. For example, the capacity of the Sangha in areas, which had followed the Sakhi model (of paid workers at the Sangha level) initially, like in UP are likely to take longer to reach a stage where they can function without the regular facilitation which the MS programme provides.

Efforts are now on how to make the 'strong' sanghas play a more independent role & to make these experienced sangha women to take on themselves the role

of catalysts in the village, which sahayoginis have so far been playing, thereby freeing sahayoginis to organize MS activities in newer areas

This debate in itself has not been easy at any level, the Sangha or with MS functionaries. At the Sangha level, while some groups have been very confident, other sanghas have not been as confident about working on their own. For such Sanghas a period of decelerated intervention, which gradually tapers off as they get used to the idea of working alone, seems to be the most viable option.

The consensus seems to be that, while some sanghas have evolved to a stage where they can play an independent role at the village level, a major source of strength has been the Mahila Samakhya identity and linkage. This has provided the collective strength not only for the programme as a whole, but also for the individual Sangha. When necessary, Sanghas have come together to handle major problems. It is clear that any efforts at making the Sanghas independent of MS should keep this in mind.

This recognition that sanghas in isolation will not be able to survive, has led to attempts to build lateral solidarities among sanghas, and to form federations at block & district levels, which could take over the role of the district offices; and the formation of resource groups, which can provide support to the programme. Over the past few years, especially in the older blocks the process of federating sanghas has started. Currently 114 federations have been formed in the project states.

Impact of women's mobilization on girls education

One of the most effective expressions of women's understanding of their life situations is in the decisions that women across all the states have taken with regard to children's/ girls education. This is manifested in various ways. Taking decisions to send children/girls to schools or the Mahila Shikshan Kendras (residential learning centers) which in several cases means decisions to withdraw children from work and a loss of income to the household. Acting against child marriage and postponing marriage by several years. Ensuring that the educational system is effective through monitoring of schools and actively participating in school bodies such as the village and school education committees. One of the most important markers of this sense of ownership has been the degree of voluntarism and financial support that the sanghas provide to the various educational interventions and bridging courses. As the sanghas mature, there are clear articulations of a desire for a better future for their daughters and strong demands for alternative learning streams that enable girls, especially adolescent girls to get an opportunity to learn.

A range of interventions has been introduced to specific the local context. These alternatives include residential as well as non-residential learning facilities. What is of significance is the attempt to enable the direct participation of the sanghas women that underpins the running of these various options.

- Non-formal education options

The non-formal education option is seen as a bridging intervention.

- The Jagjagi Centres in Bihar for instance cater to 9+ girls. Aimes specifically at adolescent girls a separate curriculum and text book has been developed specifically for older girls. The role of the sanghas in the running of the kendras is crucial. The sanghas is responsible for the appointment of teachers, monitoring of the functioning of the centers and. payments are made through the sanghas.
- In a similar effort in AP, Bal Mitra Kendras have been opened to serve as bridge especially for child labour, especially girls. The sanghas are involved in monitoring teacher regularity and in ensuring that children especially girls attend the Kendra. Building on the Rishi Valley " School in Box" education kit, the basic curriculum has been expanded to include issues of gender, health, sanitation, environment, rights etc.
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- The Mahila Shikshan Kendras provide short term and long-term courses for girls. While preparing the girls to join the mainstream, an integrated curriculum has been developed address the extra academic needs of girls, especially adolescent girls. In most states the MSK curriculum includes the following

In addition to following the State curriculum, an integrated curriculum built around the following"

–Developing creative skills of expression through writing, drama, song & dance

- Understanding gender
 - Health- issues of adolescence, hygiene, reproductive health, herbal medicines
 - Environment
 - Governance systems-focus on local governance
 - Addressing violence
 - Vocational skills (an area where in one is still groping to find viable alternatives)
- Physical education such as karate, cycling, sports etc

Girls education a community agenda

Accepting ownership and shouldering responsibility

The following two cases illustrate the ways in which the alternative educational centers like Mahila Shikshan Kendras being set up by MS are now increasingly drawing the community and the women into the management and running of the centers. Initially the MSKs were started at district headquarters close to the district offices to enable closer monitoring and supervision. Today in states such as Bihar and Andhra Pradesh, the MSKS are being started at block and village levels where the sangha women and the Panchayats are getting involved in the running of such centers

Reposing Faith in the community: a case from Biharⁱ

The MSK at Saukala in Amas block in Gaya district was shifted 50 kilometers away from the district headquarters to be located at the village level. The panchayat of Saukala village has adopted the center. A committee of 1 member has been formed with the Mukhia as the chairman to monitor and supervise the MSK. The committee reviews, expenditure and arranges everything from the newspaper, to vegetables to daily items for the MSK. The security arrangements are pucca. An ayurvedic doctor who is a committee member oversees the health of the girls. The presence of the MSK has not only boosted the mahila samooch but also has had an impact on the primary school. The primary school has been upgraded. And there is a regular attendance of over 200 to 250 children in the school.

The whole process of setting up the MSK at the village level is fascinating. When MS Gaya was asked to vacate the DIET building where the MSK was housed, they were frantic on what to do. The Mahila Samooch of Saukala village sent a message that land was available in their village. The negotiations then started with the panchayat, which agreed to donate the land for the construction of a building. Different samoochs contributed Rs.100 each, the sahayoginis and sahelis contributed Rs.100 each, the local MLA was persuaded to support the construction of the compound wall, the village samooch is using its funds to build a toilet, the district magistrate provided the funds for the construction of a hall. The State power minister has been approached for an electricity connection. The construction began in 2002 and was completed within a year. While the construction was underway, the MSK functioned from makeshift arrangements made in the village.

Sangha women an integral part of the running of the MSK: case from Andhra Pradeshⁱⁱ

Discussions in the federations on the issue of girl child education led to the idea to start MSKs at mandal level to cater to the education needs of many adolescent girls who have not accessed the district level MSK. The first mandal level MSK was started in Mahabubnagar district. Initially, the discussion centered on the federation's role in identifying and mobilizing the girls and sensitizing their parents. Considering this as one of their first activity as a federation, the members held village, cluster level meetings and

had detailed discussions on the issue. They identified and mobilized around 50 girls. Then the issues of where and how the MSK would be run come up. At that point the federation members had said that as they had taken the responsibility thus far they would like to continue it by managing the MSK too..

There was a lot of discussion on the responsibilities of MS and the federation. Lot of debate has goes in to understand and build in clarity of responsibilities of federation, It was decided that identifying teachers and training is the responsibility of MS, managing the MSK, taking care of the children was decided to be the role of the federation. To build in more ownership and accountability the federation decided that their members would be physically present in MSK. They are expected to cook, monitor the well being of the children and manage the MSK but also learn in the process. Every month two women on rotation spend time in the MSK.

In a recent meeting in 2004 at Minpur cluster in Medak district, the women who came to meet us had girl's education high on their agenda. They had identified close to 100 girls who were school dropouts. They were vocal in their demand that such a center be started in their cluster, as the 2 MSKs run by MS cannot accommodate any more girls. The federation members stated that they would be responsible for finding space at the mandal headquarters, talk to the panchayas and mandal officials for such a space and that they would on rotation have two of their members present in the MSK for a month at a time. This is an emerging model now.

CASE STUDIES OF ADOLESCENT GIRLS

I am Pinky, the anudeshikaⁱⁱⁱ

So introduces Pinky, a 18 year old Kishori Kendra teacher of Bankatia village, Gorakhpur district, Uttar Pradesh “ We were eight of us, maybe that’s why we could not attend school”. When MS was extended to her village, she overheard discussions on girl’s education, she boldly asked, “since you are talking of education why don’t you open a school for us so that we can also study?” She joined when the Kishori Kendra was started. Two years down the lane, Pinky herself became an assistant teacher for the Kendra and at the same time preparing herself for the 5th class board exam. Emerging as a village leader Pinky has motivated other illiterate adolescent girls to join the kishori kendra and plays an active role in getting younger girls she enrolled in the primary school.

Learning, Karate and Recognition, the story of Lalitha

“ In my village, I was doing nothing but cutting grass, fetching firewood, cleaning and cooking. In between, I used to attend the ‘jagjagi’, but this was without the knowledge of my parents, recalls Lalitha now a sprightly 16 year old from the district of Sitamarhi, in Bihar. Lalitha’s parents had wanted to get her married at the age of 10; she only learnt to read at the age of 12. Lalitha remembers” my twin brother caught me going to school. He beat me up since he was ashamed of the fact that I had dared to study when none of the men in our family had ever attended school. My mother condoned the violence.. I could not understand how mothers do not side with their daughters.

In 1997 when the Mahila Samakhya programme started the residential center, the Mahila Shikshan Kendra, Lalitha defied her parents and attended the MSK After the 8 month course along with 24 other girls many of whom had never been to school. Besides learning to read and writing, the girls were also taught cycling, karate, hygiene, healthcare and public speaking. After the course Lalitha was given further training in karate. Today she is a karate instructor teaching in 4 other MSKs . When Lalitha was featured on the cover of UNICEF’s report on the State of the World’s children 2004, her parents pride knew no bounds. Bhadaï Majhi, Lalitha’s father says, ‘ Now I believe every daughter has the potential and I will tell everyone to think differently. Her mother Saroopia Devi beams with pride, ‘ look at the respect that is being given to my daughter’. Today Lalitha is an independent young woman who supports herself and her family. ‘I want to keep studying and become an accomplished teacher. I want to teach girls about the world outside their experience, and I dream of a school in every village’.^{iv}

Life skills to the fore

Sumitra belongs to Tilanghi village under Sonebarsa block of Sitamarhi District. Bihar. Sumitra studies at the jagJaggi centre and is also a member of the Kishori manch. One night, around 9 p.m., Sumitra and her mother along with some other women came out for a walk. It was June and quite hot.

As they walked they saw eight rowdy boys on a cycle trying to knock down Umesh, a local teenager. When Umesh tried to stop them, they cursed him and one of them pulled

out a knife and threatened to stab him. This happened so fast that the women stood still, horrified.

Suddenly, Sumitra intervened. Her Karate instruction at the jagjaggi centre promoted her to rush in and pull Umesh away from his attacker. At the same time she caught the assailant's hand and twisted his knife out of his grasp. Hearing the commotion, the other villagers came rushing to the spot.

They were astounded that Sumitra mere girl averted such an ugly incident. How did you become so brave? They asked. Sumitra told them about the jagjaggi training that inspires teenage girl to act with confidence. "I got such courage at the Kishori Mandal meeting and at Kishori training programs" she said. From that day onwards, the people of Tilangahi village do not object to their daughters attending meeting at the Kishori Mach and Jagjaggi Kendras.

As a result of this incident, the rowdy elements have stopped teasing girls or passing rude remarks.

From behind the veil: the case of Shameema of Idukki district, Kerala^v

19 year old Shameema of Idukki district managed to study up to the 9th standard when she was asked to drop out of school by her parents who wanted to get her married. The family reeling under the burden of the dowry paid for Shameema's older sister, found it difficult to raise the money for Shameema's marriage. The pressures and the frustration of the family took a toll of Shameema. When in 2003 an adolescent girls programme was launched by Kerala Mahila Samakhya, Shameema found her support group. She met many other girls younger than her who faced similar problems. Some of the girls helped her with books and assisted her to prepare for the Xth class exam., which she passed in 2004. She learnt embroidery and now is making a small income based on this skill. Shameema is saving to do her intermediate. Her parents are now in full support of her continuing her formal education. Shameema has now become a role model for other Muslim girls in her village, many of who now want to join the adolescent girls programme

ⁱ Courtesy, Mahila Samakhya Bihar

ⁱⁱ Courtesy, Andhra Pradesh Mahila Samatha Society, (the Mahila Samakhya programme in Andhra Pradesh)

ⁱⁱⁱ Centre for Advocacy and Research,(2004) **Mahila Samakhya in Uttar Pradesh,a documentation** (draft manuscript), New Delhi

^{iv} Unicef,(2004) "Real lives, Transformation through education: the story of Lalitha", in **India at a Glance, The big picture**

^v Courtesy Mahila Samakhya Kerala