

MAHILA SAMAKHYA

EDUCATION FOR WOMEN'S EQUALITY

NATIONAL OVERVIEW REPORT

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**National project office
Department of Education
Ministry of Human Resource Development
Government of India
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FOREWORD

This overview report has been based on the field experiences of the National Project Office. An effort has been made to bring out the broad trends in the project, identify the main problem areas and give a birds eye view of the programme.

This overview has been prepared for the Second Indo-Dutch Review, and has to be read along with the statewise reports and the audiovisual documentation.

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1 PROGRAM LAUNCHING IN THE THREE STATES

1.1 Mahila Samakhya is an unusual program to be implemented by any government. The first reaction is invariably one of surprise and disbelief for the main focus of Mahila Samakhya is to enable poor women to fight and demand a place in decision making processes both within their own family/community and with the administrative, developmental and educational structure they encounter every day.

1.2 Launching the program was a challenge and Mahila Samakhya had to adapt and mold itself to the conditions prevailing in each state. While the broad strategy to be followed was common, the success of the program depended on its ability to adapt to different situations. The project was formally approved by Government of India in September 1988 and the Indo Dutch agreement concluded in July 1989. In the pre-project phase the main focus was on discussing the MS concept with both government and non government organizations and getting together a core group of women who will steer the program in the state. The MS unit in Delhi was primarily involved in doing the spade work for the registration of the MS Society, drafting the memorandum for the society, preparing the necessary financial and administrative rules to ensure flexibility and identifying women who could steer the program in the states. Networking with women's organization and other voluntary organizations, liaise with the State government to make the MS Society a reality, ensuring support and networking within the official machinery to elicit interest and cooperation was a major preoccupation of the National Office in 1988-90.

1.3 Mahila Samakhya Societies in Karnataka and Gujarat were registered and operationalised in April 1989. The two state governments registered the society and appointed the State Program Directors by April 1, 1989. Government of Gujarat appointed Ms Kusum Chauhan as Officer of Special Duty in November 1988 in order to register and make operational the MS Society. Ms Srilatha Batliwala was appointed as State Program Director and took charge on April 1, 1989. Subsequently the MS Societies have continued to work autonomously, with the National Office extending support when needed and being there when called upon. The program has grown and taken root in the state, built a support structure and has been accepted as an innovative education program for women within the state.

with Jagori coordinating training and resource support. After the MS Society was registered and operationalised under the Directorate of Adult Education, Government of Uttar Pradesh - this loose confederation started coming together .

1.8 Working with a loose confederations of MS grantees and ensuring that the basic tenets of the program are not diluted has been the greatest challenge in Uttar Pradesh. Voluntary organizations used to the grant-in-aid model give a lot of importance to reaching targets and utilization of the funds earmarked for a given period. This is particularly important because any grant giving organization evaluates success on the basis of its capability to deliver what was budgeted for. In MS, utilization of funds for AE , NFE , Sangha huts etcetera has never been seen as targets. They are seen as enabling provisions. The emphasis is on the process which enable rural women's collectives to identify and articulate their needs and work out in detail the logistics involved in creating and managing them. For example in order to build the Mahila Sangha hut, once the women feel they actually need it, they are expected to apply for the land, meet the concerned officials and go through the entire process of acquiring that piece of land in the name of their collective. Once the land has been acquired, they are expected to design the hut [with help of some professionals], manage the funds for construction and ultimately plan its use. This is a long process which is not short-circuited at any cost. In the process if the funds lapse in one year it is carried forward to the next year. Some of the nodal agencies used to a grant-in-aid mechanism were impatient with the MS insistence on processes which they felt prevented them from delivering services quickly. Launching the program through NGO's and transferring it to the MSS society after two years has been a difficult task. The UP program has to been seen in this context.

1.9 When Mahila Samakhya was being drafted, the financial pattern was based on other government programs. Systems worked out for financial monitoring and annual releases was also based on the experience of other central sector schemes in GOI. Over the last two years, it became apparent that an innovative programs need innovative budgeting. Very often financial procedures become bottlenecks. This was discussed at various levels, and as the program is moving into the VIII plan, the system of budgeting and financial monitoring has been changed accordingly. This has been outlined in Chapter V.

aries become a part of the government/NGO hierarchy taking orders from them. They often share their superiors contempt for the "ignorant villagers" and essentially see their role as advisors to the community. A number of problems occurred in this model, such as :

2.3.1 Even though they were supposed to be honorary/part time workers, they invariably saw themselves as government employees. They also formed unions and struck for higher wages and recognition as full time government employees.

2.3.2 Because they were undertaking externally determined tasks, they were often at odds with the beneficiaries they were serving.

2.3.3 Their selection/appointment was done by outsiders and the village community had no say in the matter. Therefore they were loyal to their superiors and fulfilled their targets. The conflict between the village community and such functionaries in family planning programs is well known.

2.3.4 Not being accountable to the village community, they were given to shirking work, petty corruption and many other ills of a top down program.

2.3.5 This loss of morale was accompanied by a total dependence on the small honorarium and a loss of traditional occupation skills. As a government functionary, they became alienated from their own community and started identifying themselves with the administrative machinery. In many cases they became an inherent part of the village power structure.

2.4 There have been exceptions to the above scenario, but they are few and far between. Through intensive training, supportive supervision and creation of positive value systems, one can probably minimize the illeffects of the paid worker syndrome. Individuals - even if they are highly motivated and skilled cannot bring about social change from without for the most powerful incentive to change lies within the hearts and minds of the people. Creating dependency on an externally paid and supported catalyst may be counterproductive in the long run.

2.5 All these factors assumed greater significance in Mahila Samakhya because it is a time bound program. Our greatest priority was to build a network which becomes progressively autonomous and independent of the project infrastructure. On the other hand, in very backward regions it may be necessary to have a few village level catalysts to help organize women into a

2.9 The program is grappling with many issues and each model has been adopted after a great deal of thought. There are no magical solutions to the problems of catalyzing women's forums in every village and in the ultimate analysis, what has been made possible in MS is the freedom to experiment, make mistakes and learn.

break of three weeks in between when the Sahayoginis are expected to move around in their area. As the district teams are becoming more experienced and with the induction of older Sakhis, Sahayakis or Sahayoginis into the training team, each district has been able to work out its own method. A significant observation made in an internal review meeting was that when rural women train/communicate with other women like themselves, then very little time is taken to break the ice and help women open out. On the other hand urban women trainers - regardless of their sensitivity and skill - may take a longer time to build a rapport with women. An experienced Sahayogini can quickly zero in on vital issues.

3.4 Cultural factors play a very important role. Women in areas where they are totally confined either behind a purdah or in rigid social customs take a much longer time to open out than women who feel free to move around. Tribal women who commute every day to collect firewood and sell it in the market and fisherwomen who go and sell fish in the market every day may open out much faster than women who have never left their village. Similarly, the status of women in a given society, determine the nature of training inputs.

3.5 One of the issues that have generated a lot of debate is the role of outside resource persons as trainers. When it comes to specific inputs like health, law or any technical skill the role of the trainer is very clear. However, if the ongoing orientation and training of Sakhis and Sahayoginis are done by an outside team, their role in the DIU vis-a-vis regular follow-up visits to the villages, participation in the monthly meetings of Sahayoginis and monitoring the "impact of their training" becomes a particularly tricky issue. They end up taking over the role of the District Coordinator/ Resource Person. In some cases, the District team ends up depending on the trainers for their day to day work and do not enhance their own capability to lead the team. There are obviously no easy solutions and each district team has to arrive at its own balance.

3.6 In all the district, ongoing activities provide an ideal forum for training. For example, in the monthly Sahayogini meetings held over two days - they get an opportunity to look at their work as a group, plan for the next month and discuss conceptual issues as and when they emerge. Similarly, Sahayoginis initiate the same process with Sakhis/Sahayakis. Large gatherings like the Mahiti Mela in Bidar, Sammelans in Saharanpur,

4 MAHILA SAMAKHYA NGO RELATIONSHIP - SOME ISSUES

4.1 When the program was being planned in 1988-89, an important concern was to devise mechanisms to prevent excessive bureaucratization. Providing space for non-government organizations and individual activists as the conscience keepers of the program was a carefully worked out strategy. Meaningful partnership with the non-government sector was seen as an important component of this strategy. Therefore in the initial phase a great deal of time and energy was spent in identifying partners. Detail discussions were held on the criteria of selection of NGO's. MS was launched through voluntary organizations in three of the ten districts in October 1988 i.e, before it was formally approved by GOI. The project infrastructure was set up almost six months after the program was informally launched. Women's organizations were difficult to find in the districts, therefore NGO's having a presence among the poorest communities were identified. Over the years, there have been ups and downs, and MS-NGO relationship has not been as simple and straightforward as was expected in 1988.

4.2 MS takes great pains to see that women who come in contact with the program walk with their heads held high. Training in MS ultimately leads to enhancing the self image and self-confidence of women. The first comment a Sakhi or Sahayogini hears on her return from any MS activity or training from men in their area is -" you think you have grown wings since you started working in MS !" Some of the NGO partners were chosen even though they were not working among women or have women in decision making positions in their group. Groups with sensitivity to the gender question or women's organizations were difficult to come by in most districts and in the absence of such groups it seemed logical to work with organizations which have a significant presence among disadvantaged communities. As MS was seen as an active partnership, it was felt that gender input could be provided through training and regular interactions. Conflicts emerged in many districts, for example :

4.2.1 In one district the organizational head asked the Sakhis to support the NFE center [supported under MS] by cleaning the place, wiping the faces of children and fetching water. When this issue was raised and when the women said they wanted to participate in the selection and training of the instructors, monitor their work and be seen as a coworker and not as a helper, their request was ignored. When this issue was pursued, the

MS insistence on initiating work on such inputs only after the Sangha clearly articulates its need. For example if a village Sangha wants a child care center it should make a case for it. Existence of ICDS centers, their accessibility, impact, existence of other services in the village, their access to all communities/hamlets in the village ; is discussed at length . MSP tries, as far as possible, to activate existing resources before starting anything new. The facility is planned carefully and the Sangha is made to internalize the idea that it is their center and they are responsible for it. Is not seen as yet another government service. They select the center workers, decide on the inputs, pay the worker and manage the funds of the center. No supervisory structure is encouraged from above. In Karnataka, the Sangha goes through the process of applying for a center, defending their proposal, planning it and finally managing it. This is done to enable women to understand procedures involved in acquiring any government service. This is a slow process, but once the women go through it they feel confident to gain access to and control over other services in their area. Impatience of some conventional development oriented NGO's pushes the MS functionaries to explain the MS strategy at every step. Debate over conventional approaches to service delivery leads to conflicts with some NGO partners. MS is put in a difficult position when NGO partners repeatedly raise fundamental issues in every DRG meetings or when Sahayoginis raise these issues with NGO members. Intra organizational conflicts is then attributed to MS. It gets worse when some NGO functionaries leave their organization as a result of such conflicts or if some women apply for jobs in MS. As this is a very large program with scope for expansion, MS is seen as a threat and MS-NGO relationship becomes strained.

4.5 In the first year a conscious decision was taken not to work in the same villages as the NGO, but in villages where no NGO is active [UP is an exception as MS itself was being implemented through NGOs]. Towards the end of the second year, MSP has been able to start various interesting activities. At this stage, small NGO's working in the area started feeling uneasy over MSP's ability to respond to and provide concrete inputs. Having decided not to overstep each other's territories the dilemma is whether MS should extend into the NGO villages or not.

4.6 Some organizations, especially activist groups equate organizing women with agitation and struggle. If they are working with lower castes they are perforce against upper castes; if they speak of women they are perforce against men and if they are involved in any struggle which involves clashing with the administration/police/courts then they take an aggressive

Has the new pattern - re Budget "ideas" evolved,
based on the experience of MSP in 1989-91.

5 FACILITATING DECENTRALIZATION

5.1 When the program was being drafted, a great deal of attention was paid to the concept, approach to training, procedure for selection of project staff and innumerable details regarding the kind of support structure required to nurture the program in the initial phase.

5.2 However, when the budget was being formulated, the conventional system of calculations to arrive at a comprehensive figure for the project was followed. We tried to estimate how many Mahila Sanghas, NFE centers, AE centers etc would come up in each block of 100 villages. Similarly, estimates were calculated on the basis of annual addition of 100 villages per district. All the funds required for Mahila Sanghas, including huts, AE, NFE etc, was provided from day one of the first year. Even though the project document and the notes on the financial pattern clearly stated that no targets will be imposed, in effect calculations were made on certain numbers of villages to be covered and a certain number of components per village. Funds to the Mahila Samakhya societies were released on the basis of this budget. This resulted in some problems, namely :

5.2.1 No gestation period was provided for setting up the project structure. Obviously, the identification, selection and training of Sahayoginis would take time. Mahila Sanghas would need time to come together as a cohesive group. The project document went into great details on the need for time and space, and how services be delivered on demand only. Mahila Samakhya was seen as a program that would generate a demand for education and a mechanism to increase women's participation in village level forums - including the village education committees. Educational inputs - called program components in the project document was to be made to women if they wanted. The budget did not reflect this.

5.2.2 Calculations were made for a cluster of 100 villages and all inputs were budgeted for. When the conceptual part of the project was designed to make room for region/community specific innovations, there was little scope for variations in the budget. The Mahila Samakhya Societies were thus burdened with enormous funds when their capacity to absorb them was limited. In the first year they were concentrating on selecting their teams, training them and getting the project infrastructure on the ground.

controls and rigid financial patterns rob programs of its initiative. Once the project staff at the state and district level feel they have no control over their own plans and that targets are handed to them by someone who is not aware of their working condition - then they lose interest. If Mahila Samakhya is to steer clear of this trap, it was imperative to respond to signals of distress and take corrective measures immediately.

5.5 The financial pattern, pending approval for the VIII plan period reflects this commitment. The following changes have been suggested:

5.5.1 While the staffing pattern of the National, State, and District level project offices have been worked out in order to keep the management cost low; no such numbers, rules and limits have been stipulated for activities.

5.5.2 A lump sum has been provided in the budget for all activities. The overall project budget has not been based on any de-facto targets taken as a base for calculations. Each state unit is expected to prepare its annual budget based on the district plans. Funds will be released on the basis of these plans. The Executive Committee of the MSS has to approve and forward these plans/budgets.

5.5.3 Financial patterns in the form of unit costs have been worked out with respect to Sahayoginis, Mahila Sanghas, Huts, Mahila Shikshan Kendras and District Resource Units for AE/NFE. The MSS cannot exceed the limits prescribed in these unit costs.

5.5.4 MSS can follow the approved financial patterns for AE, NFE, and Children's Centers. The Executive Committee has full powers to approve any innovative model keeping in view the reasonableness of the financial requirement. For example if a district decides to adopt a camp based approach to literacy, the Executive Committee is fully empowered to approve this. As it is chaired by the Education Secretary of the state, and the State Departments of Finance and GOI are represented in the committee, its decisions will be treated as final.

5.5.5 The number of resource persons in each district has been linked to coverage. An additional resource person has been provided for every additional cluster of 100 villages. Similarly, if any district adopts the approved GOI pattern for AE or NFE, they can provide additional staff on the lines of those schemes.

5.5.6 The responsibility of the National office is to ensure smooth flow of funds. On incurring expenditure to the tune

6 NATIONAL LEVEL SUPPORT FOR THE PROGRAM

6.1 In the initial phase, the National Resource Group and the National Project Office played an advocacy role to communicate the concept, convince people in the states/districts that it was worth a try and generating enthusiasm for implementation. The energy for the program came from the concept, its power, and through the experience of organizations like SPARC, Bombay and the Women's Development Program, Rajasthan.

6.2 As the Mahila Samakhya Societies came up and the program started becoming a reality, the NPO held the hands of the state and district teams, helped iron out financial and administrative problems, intervened in crisis situations, trained/oriented the district and state units in all aspects of administration and finance and nurtured the fledgling program. In the Department of Education, a great deal of time was devoted by senior officials towards extending moral support. This nurturing role continued until the state teams were able to carve out a place for themselves in the state. In Gujarat and Karnataka the Executive Committees started providing guidance and support. The NRG and NPO however continued to steer Uttar Pradesh.

6.3 1990-91 was a phase of feverish activity and each district/state unit was totally immersed in their own work. At this juncture, the NRG and NPO took a back seat - it extended support, participated in activities, and shared the ups and downs. As expected, the energy for the program now came from the Sanghas, Sahayoginis, District Units and the State Units. It was now upto the national level bodies to respond.

6.4 Many issues concerning the concept, strategy and administrative bottlenecks were thrown up for discussion. The state teams did not want the NRG meetings to limit its role to listening progress reports. They wanted the NRG as a sounding board of experienced and creative people who could flesh out in programmatic terms the innovative ideas been thrown up in the field. In July, 1990 the NRG debated the Education Component of the program. Subsequently a note on the concept of a paid village level worker was circulated by Karnataka and Gujarat. Often the state teams

different strategies, innovations and experiences;

[iii] Provide a forum for reflection, sharing experiences of program functionaries;

[iv] Respond to the information needs of the MS units and facilitate joint evaluations and;

[v] Organize workshops to orient new entrants and key officials dealing with the program in GOI and the in the State Governments.

6.7 The National Project Office, consisting of a Project Director, one consultant and administrative staff could not raise to the expectations of the program. It is this context that a Resource Unit attached to the National Office is being discussed so that the financial monitoring and administrative functions could be performed by the project office in MHRD, while all work related to documentation, collation and dissemination of information and giving systematic resource inputs into the program could be taken over by the Resource Unit.

6.8 Structures and roles will continue to change in accordance with the changing needs of the program . The greatest strength of the program has been its ability to adapt continuously to different situations. Perhaps this pilot program will be able to make concrete recommendations in the area of planning for decentralization by demonstrating the viability of a bottom up approach in large government sponsored development projects.