

EDUCATION FOR EMPOWERMENT

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

Executive Summary

Mahila Samakhyas, a programme of the Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD) 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:

- Literacy, when embedded in an empowerment process through women's collectives, has greater relevance for women.
- Awareness on education and school enrolment for children is mobilized, with special focus on the girl child.
- The focus on women's rights, voice, and collective empowerment has resulted in improving the quality of service delivery in schools.
- Women are seen as an embodiment of knowledge, the source of collective strength, and as change agents working towards a gender-just society.



MHRD and Federations: Possibilities for Partnership

Operating on the concept of "Education for Empowerment", federations contribute to:

- **Eradicating Adult Illiteracy:** Hosting the 'Adult Literacy Programme' within the Sanghas has given women the opportunity to use functional literacy in activities linked to the collectives (such as recording minutes of meeting, keeping accounts, calculating attendance, wages and interest rates, filling forms, writing RTI applications and so on). This has also raised their consciousness on the benefits of literacy, and more importantly, has followed an unconventional empowerment approach of building capabilities of women in daily life, instead of just learning words and numbers alone.
- **Universalizing Elementary Education:** By running Mahila Shikshan Kendras (residential bridge courses for adolescent girls) and community based learning centres such as Jagjagi Kendras, initiating school enrolment campaigns, and encouraging adolescent collectives, federations reach a wide audience to raise awareness on education and promote enrolment of children into regular schools.
- **Improving Quality of Education:** Oriented towards rights and empowerment, federations have monitored schools, participated in village education committees, managed mid-day meal programmes, and developed gender perspectives among children and teachers, thus ensuring the quality of education in multiple ways.

Policy Messages for Ministry of Human Resource Development



♦ Locate literacy programmes within women's collectives

Grassroots women's collectives with education as a priority will ensure that literacy programmes are customised to local contexts, quality is improved and retention of students is increased.

♦ Embed literacy in the process of empowerment

Literacy in combination with empowerment interventions will improve the situation of education for girls and women.

♦ Social and community oversight on educational processes

Collectives who are aware of their rights should be included in village education committees, and involved in social audit, scholarship, and stipend delivery teams, to ensure quality of education and processes.

Challenges for the Ministry of Human Resource Development

The Government of India has made several efforts to combat illiteracy since independence. Despite those efforts, the national female literacy in 2001 remained low at 53.67% as against male literacy of 75.3%, which also needs to be improved. The situation worsens in rural areas with female literacy being as low as 46.1%. Although literacy missions have been in place, reaching the marginalized populations has always been a challenge. There are major issues that face the MHRD in achieving its goal, mostly related to service delivery:

- Lack of appropriate educational infrastructure (class rooms, teachers, Teaching Learning Materials)
- Issues concerning the girl child (early drop outs for baby-sitting, early marriage)
- Exclusion of marginalized communities (dalits, tribals, other ethnic populations)
- Issues of poverty (early drop outs, child labour)
- Migration resulting in populations that do not continue their education
- Educational needs of disabled children

Cutting across all issues is the quality of education that still remains a distant goal. The following sections outline some of the unique challenges of MHRD and some possible solutions to address them through women's *Sanghas* and federations.

Challenge 1: Lack of retention of adult women in Adult Literacy Programmes (ALP)

In the case of adults, retention at educational centres, lack of life skills and issues of gender discrimination restrict educational opportunities for women. Even after women study at literacy centres, they often revert to illiteracy when they stop coming to the centres. Also, signature-based literacy programmes have proved unsuccessful in making literacy relevant to women's lives.

Solution 1: Link National Literacy Programmes with Adult Literacy Programmes

The Adult Literacy Programme (see Box 1) hosted by the *Sanghas*, has been able to tackle several of the above problems. Women have been able to continuously use literacy skills in activities related to the federations and *Sanghas*. Moreover, through continuous consciousness raising within the *Sanghas*, these women are well aware of the benefits of being literate. The ALP has followed an unconventional approach of building capabilities of daily life instead of learning just words and numbers. The MHRD can partner with federations to run this model of a literacy programme within the national literacy schemes.



Box 1: The Adult Literacy Programme run by Mahila Samakhyas for the women in *Sanghas* and federations is distinctive with its emphasis on women's empowerment, where literacy is an integral component of that process. The ALP stands apart from other literacy programmes in that:

- It is introduced only when women understand the challenges they face due to illiteracy and articulate their demand for literacy training.
- Instead of emphasizing signatures only, the ALP focuses on education for empowerment
- It builds on women's knowledge and skills and tailors content to make it relevant to their lives
- It provides flexibility of timings of classes and course content

The programme was implemented through literacy camps and through Jagrity Kendras which are village-level literacy centres, facilitated by volunteers called *Gayatris* who are trained in the adult literacy primers, adult learning methodology and the philosophy of running these centres. The ALP has resulted in close to 100,000 women becoming literate, compounded by the additional benefits of increased confidence and sense of well being as a woman. These benefits have also spilled over into the family and community. A promising by-product of relevant literacy skills is that women now send their daughters to school, and take part in literacy and school enrolment campaigns. Since life skills are also taught in the ALP, women now are able to interface with banks and fill forms to access programmes. Currently, several federation women have taken this knowledge to the next level, to monitor government institutions, manage businesses, negotiate with organizations and even write proposals for agencies to run projects.

Challenge 2: Exclusion of adolescent girls from the educational process

Adolescent girls are often excluded from education because of deeply entrenched gender discrimination, where girls are either married off early or expected to help at home in sibling care and household chores; accentuated by the lack of schools close by. Poverty also results in the parents choosing to prioritise expenditure on boys over girls' education.

Solution 2.1: Link Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalayas (KGBV) to federations for education for empowerment

Federations have strengthened grassroots women's movements, anchored platforms for adolescent girls and boys, and have led to many innovations such as Jagjagi Kendras (JJK), Mahila Shikshan Kendras (MSK) and gender education for men and boys. The MSKs (see Box 2) are residential learning centres, which offer an innovative comprehensive educational programme with a specially designed academic curriculum for drop-outs and never enrolled girls. MSKs were institutionalized into the KGBV programme with Mahila Samakhya as the implementing agency for MS states written into its guidelines. The presence of federations in running MSKs has ensured that educational interventions reach the most marginalized communities and that the community is made aware of the benefits of education. It is also important to promote exposure visits of KGBV officials to federation run MSKs to retain the elements of empowerment epitomized by the model. MSKs continue to innovate, through the federations, to include difficult to reach populations such as sexually abused girls, women in jails, girls subjected to harassment, amongst others. Such models need to be promoted.



Box 2: The Mahila Shikshan Kendra

The Mahila Shikshan Kendras (MSK) are residential learning centres run by Mahila Samakhya, for drop out and never enrolled girls. They are taken through an eight to eleven month programme for subjects such as mathematics, social science, Hindi, and general knowledge, as well as are further sensitized on gender. The *Sanghas* and Federations play a major role in ensuring that the poorest and the most marginalized girls are able to access the MSKs. They mobilize the community through door-to-door campaigns on the importance of education and ensure that the most deserving enroll into the programme. Several federations themselves run MSKs independently.

MSK pedagogy is non-confrontational, gender sensitive and imparts life skills training including karate and cycling. The programme creates leaders who become change agents in their villages to motivate other girls to study. MSKs have become instrumental in mainstreaming girls into the education system, building their awareness, and giving vocational exposure. This has resulted in several girls starting economic activities to fund their own education leading to their own empowerment. The biggest impact of the Mahila Shikshan Kendra is that it has led to instituting the KGBV programme as a national programme under Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, that provides adolescent girls across the country an opportunity to study.

Solution 2.2: Promote community based learning centres as bridge courses for girls

The Jagjagi Kendras are community-based learning centres in Bihar located in areas where there are no schools, often in the most marginalised communities. The JJKs are managed and run locally in the community by *Sanghas*. A teacher, chosen from a *Sangha* is trained to run the Kendra and teach the girls. JJKs act as a bridge course instrumental in mainstreaming girls into regular schools. Teachers help girls overcome the inhibitions of attending classes with younger children and also get them ready to cope with the subjects as they enter school. The biggest impact is seen in the community's positive attitude towards education. The Jagjagi Kendras are often the only recourse for education of girls, due to the absence of schools close by. With the Right to Education Act being enforced, JJKs are under the threat of being closed down. It is critical to nurture these centres with more care, provide the time and resources required for complementary formal mechanisms to emerge, and ensure that children do not fall between the cracks and be completely left out of education in the interim.



Overall Policy Messages

This multilayered impact of *Sanghas* and federations has at its core, the recognition that education must be looked at more broadly than only in terms of words and numbers. This recognition obtained from long years of successful experience on a very large scale in the diverse cultural settings of ten states has a number of policy messages built into it. The best approach would be to build life skills and capacities of women and girls for social change in their given contexts. The *Sanghas* and federations must be recognized as a possible working model to be universalized across the country to achieve adult literacy and address challenges of girls' education. A number of corollaries emerge from this:

1. Locate literacy programmes within women's collectives

The success of MS and federation-driven adult literacy programmes is a function of local adaptation, creativity, and decentralized management. The base institutions of this progress are not just the Mahila Shikshan Kendras, Jaggi Kendras, or Kastuba Gandhi Balika Vidyalayas alone, but rather the *Sanghas* and federations that provide the back bone for these interventions. Therefore, any universalization would have to assume the presence of this backbone. Federations can help identify learners for the Shakshar Bharat programme and mobilize them to join the literacy classes.

2. Embed literacy in the process of empowerment

In order to improve the situation of education for women and girls, literacy capacities on words and numbers must be embedded in the empowerment process. This would improve gender relations in family, neighborhood and society, as can be seen from the work of existing federations. Such a model would be the most apt for replication towards achieving the goal of educating rural adult women. Such an empowered group of women would play critical roles in mobilising community support for educational interventions for girls.

3. Social and community oversight on educational processes

Sanghas and federations working on rights-based approaches are better equipped for community oversight of educational institutions. Various steps can be taken to promote this:



- *Sanghas* could have representation in Village Education Committees, Parent Teachers Associations and other village-level decision-making bodies. Wherever neighborhood schools (Education guarantee scheme schools) are run, *Sanghas* and federations must be part of their management committees.
- Federations are qualified to conduct social audit of education delivery institutions of the area.
- *Sanghas* and federations could be made part of the scholarship and stipend delivery mechanisms to ensure that deserving candidates from marginalized sections can avail of such opportunities.
- Children of special needs form a unique category and require particular attention, care and supervision to ensure that social stigma does not come in the way of their assimilation and advancement in normal education. This is best provided by *Sanghas* and federations.

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