

WOMEN'S MOBILISATION AND PROGRAMME AGENDA

The village level women' collective called Sangha 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 Sanghas 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 offer any monetary or any tangible benefits. 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.

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.

Building institutions of rural poor women for addressing gender barriers and issues in education and empowerment of women has been one of the core focus of MS programme. Mahila Samakhya started with the premise that unless marginalized women are enabled to recognise and address the roots of gender discrimination themselves, it would not be possible to break the vicious cycle of isolation, discrimination and marginalization. Consequently, the Sangha, the collective space where women come together on a regular basis is where the cycle of empowerment and learning is set in motion. This learning is built around broad issues such as--access to government services, women's health, violence against women, rights and entitlements, women's role in Gram-sabhas and other local governance structures, livelihoods, and in many instances now basic literacy. Trained field facilitators provide and nurture information and capacity building, develop analytical, decision making and leadership abilities, and enable the women to make informed choices and collectively act to bring about change. There are

currently Over 50, 000 Sanghas which have got federated into 187 block and district level federations. Of these 101 federations are functioning autonomously with only periodic resource inputs from Mahila Samakhya.

Sanghas and federations are also managing and monitoring a range of supportive and alternative structures which are set up and supported by MS. Most significant among these alternative structures are Nari Adalats, Counselling centres, Sanjeevani Kendras/herbal medicine and Information centres. A total of 614 Nari Adalats, 94 Counselling Centres, 355 Sanjeevini Kendras and 177 Information centres are being run currently across 10 states. The sangha and federations are active in addressing forms of gender violence, challenging discriminatory traditional rituals and practices, stopping child marriages and dedication of girls as Devadasis in some states, ensuring information dissemination to the very marginalised, providing legal and counselling support, and ensuring better delivery of services among other things. An active convergence and partnership with Social Justice Committees of Panchayats, District Legal Service Authorities, Structures of DV Act, SCPCR among others have been forged to harness already existing resources. The programme has also facilitated initiatives such as collective farming, grain banks, RTI campaigns, and serves as a bridge between the Sanghas/federations and other women's networks and platforms.

The programme has trained over six lakh women in various thematic areas who act as a resource support to Sanghas and the programme as a whole.

A total of 15113 Sangha women have been elected to the Panchayats in various capacities. The sangha women elected to the PRIs have brought a critical gender edge to the deliberations of the PRIs. They are also playing key role in ensuring accountability in governance and implementation of the key programmes being run by the government departments at the grassroots.

Under the Mahila Samakhya Programme, 101 Mahila Shikshan Kendras (MSK) have been opened to provide condensed courses and to create a cadre of educated and aware young women in the most backward regions. These Kendras provide condensed quality and gender sensitive education to adolescent girls who have never gone to school, school dropouts, and young women. A total of over 30000 girls and women have passed out from MSKs. While the main focus is on older girls in the 15 and above age group who have never gone to school or are school dropouts or working girls, young women have also been benefiting from this programme as well. Active convergence with Shakshar Bharat has helped large number of Sangha women in acquiring formal certificates from NIOS.

The outcomes of this empowering educational process of enabling women to question, conceptualise, seek answers and to collectively act to redress problems have been many:-

- a demand for literacy has been generated
- 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
- the strength and ability to demand accountability of government delivery systems has been demonstrated
- participation in Panchayati Raj bodies has increased
- and an awareness of the need to struggle for a gender just society is being strengthened.
- Education environment at the village level, running Mahila Shikshan Kendras.

The programme is a unique one which focuses on the education of women, who have been left out of the education system. The experience of the programme in different regional contexts has validated the MS approach as an effective means to mobilise and organise women, and in enabling them to take charge of their lives and those of their daughters/children. This has resulted in many other sectoral programmes seeking to link with MS or adopt/adapt MS strategies.