

Research Article

## **Women Empowerment through Education: An analysis of the Mahila Samakhya Programme in India**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Education is globally considered as the most powerful tool to empower women. A low level of female literacy is a matter of serious concern because it not only adversely affect a women's life but also has a spill-over effect on the society at large. In India, the National Policy on Education, 1986 as revised in 1992 is often considered as the landmark in the field of policy on women's education in India. The Mahila Samakhya Programme was initiated in 1989 to translate the goals of National Policy on Education, 1986 and Programme of Action, 1992 into a concrete programme for the education and empowerment of women in rural areas, particularly of women from socially and economically marginalised groups. In this paper an attempt is made to analyse the Mahila Samakhya Programme, identify the bottlenecks in the implementation of the programme and to suggest recommendations that could contribute to the future of the programme.

**KEYWORDS:** Capacity Building. Gender Equality. Literacy. Political Participation. Social Change. Social Security.

### **INTRODUCTION**

In India, several policy documents have highlighted the fact that education is an important factor responsible for improving the overall status of women. They contain the unstated acknowledgement that education of women should endeavour to influence all spheres of their lives, not only within the educational systems but also beyond (Khullar 1990). Education opens up several opportunities for women and thereby enables them to improve their position in the society and effectively participate in the development process. The role of education in facilitating social and economic progress of women is well recognized. Education which a society provides for its women and their social position are clearly interrelated. Improvement in women's social status is generally accompanied by advancement in their education and a corresponding change in its character. That is why, "the movement for improving women's status all over the world has always emphasised education as the most significant instrument for changing women's subjugated position in society" (Kamat 1976).

The National Policy on Education (NPE) 1986 revised in 1992 is often considered as a landmark in the domain of public policy pertaining to women's education in India. It recognised the need to redress traditional gender imbalances in educational access and achievement. The NPE also recognised the fact that enhancing infrastructure alone will not redress the problem. New guidelines for policy makers and educationists were charted. The Programme of Action (POA, 1992) which translates the above guidelines into an action strategy, in the section "Education for Women's Equality" focuses on empowerment of women as the critical precondition for their participation in the education process.

The Mahila Samakhya (MS) programme was initiated in 1989 to translate the goals of National Policy on Education (NPE) 1986 and Programme of Action (POA, 1992) into a concrete programme for the education and empowerment of women in rural areas, particularly of women from socially and economically marginalised groups. Mahila Samakhya (Education for Women's Equality) was launched as a pilot project in 10 districts of Karnataka, Gujarat and Uttar Pradesh in 1989 with Dutch assistance. The project was extended to Andhra Pradesh at the end of 1992 and to Kerala in 1998-99. In 2002, after the bifurcation of Uttar Pradesh a separate programme was located in Uttarakhand. From 2003-04, the states of Bihar, Jharkhand and Assam have also been covered under the central scheme of the MS programme. Chhattisgarh and Madhya Pradesh State Societies were registered in 2006-07 (Mahila Samakhya 2014: A National Review).

The Mahila Samakhya (MS) programme started with the conviction that education for women is about change - change of the mind, of attitudes, practices, social relations and structures. MS set out with the mandate to create circumstances and an environment in which women, especially poor women, could transcend all barriers of class, caste and gender, become empowered, informed, educated and in the process demand and work towards a just and equal society in which their rights to equality and justice would be acknowledged and accepted. The understanding and practice of education in MS is embedded within the broad understanding of the organic continuum that links empowerment, learning and literacy that inform the programme (Ramachandran et al. 2012). Moving away from the dominant mainstream perspective that "literacy equals education", in Mahila Samakhya awareness, building self-confidence and a sense of self, collective action, access to information, developing a critical understanding of their life were seen as integral to an education programme for women (Rao and Rao 1999). MS was one of the first demonstrations of creative collaboration between feminist activists and progressive bureaucrats, without co-option or compromise on basic principles on either side, followed in the successive decades by several other such experiments in different sectors (Jandhyala 2012).

## **METHODOLOGY**

This paper is a descriptive study on the Mahila Samakhya (MS) programme which is premised on the idea that education is a powerful tool to ensure women's empowerment. In this paper an attempt is made to analyse how MS programme has been able to achieve its objectives and related targets, examine the bottlenecks in the implementation of the programme and to suggest recommendations that could contribute to the future of the programme. The methodology for the study includes analysis of data collected from various secondary sources like reports, documents, government records, articles, journals, books, websites and newspapers.

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

The Mahila Samakhya experience over the years offers a unique case of trying to explore and understand the issues of women's education and empowerment and the inter linkages thereof in different regional and rural contexts within India. It offers an example of the importance of empowerment of women as a critical precondition to facilitate greater inclusion of women and their daughters into education. Further, it provides an alternative paradigm to women's mobilisation and empowerment to the current and dominant focus on economic interventions as the principal strategy for women's empowerment. Successive evaluations have generally concurred with this early expectation but with certain limitations (Jandhyala 2003). The programme is considered innovative not only because of its focus on grassroots women's 'empowerment' but also because of its hybrid government-organised NGO (GONGO) form. This form is aimed at merging the benefits of small NGOs with large-scale government development programmes (Sharma 2006).

### ***Coverage of the Programme***

The programme had a modest beginning in 1988-89, as a pilot programme in ten districts in the three states of Uttar Pradesh, Karnataka and Gujarat. The National Review of the Mahila Samakhya Program in 2014 stated that it had expanded to eleven states with a presence in approximately 45,000

villages and a total of over 55,000 sanghas and a membership of approximately 1,500,000 women (Mahila Samakhya 2014: A National Review). Presently, Mahila Samakhya extends to the states of Uttar Pradesh, Gujarat, Karnataka, Kerala, Andhra Pradesh, Assam, Bihar, Uttarakhand, Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh and Telangana. In 2016, it was announced that funding to the programme shall cease from 31<sup>st</sup> March 2016. Concerns were raised that the union government is planning to move the programme to the National Rural Livelihoods Mission (NRLM) under the Ministry of Rural Development from the present Department of School Education and Literacy in Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD) (Jha and Menon 2016). The argument offered was that by integrating Mahila Samakhya with NRLM, these women will bring their expertise to the new programme that could further empower women.

### ***Organisational Structure***

The entire programme is implemented through Mahila Samakhya Societies that are established in the states where it is functional. Although the societies have representatives of government, non government organisations as well as programme personnel they are autonomous.

Sangha is the nodal point of Mahila Samakhya and all activities are planned around the Sangha. The Sangha processes are facilitated by a Sahayogini and thereby a core cadre of women leaders at village level is developed. The Mahila Sangha provides 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 action. Funds for educational activities, creative early childhood care and education centres for children and support services, where necessary are channelled through the Mahila Sangha / Federation.

A Sahayogini is the motivator, facilitator, supporter and guide for ten villages. The initial catalytic function of mobilising and organising women into Sanghas is done by the Sahayoginis. She is the key link between the 10 villages and the other supportive structures.

Federations of Mahila Sanghas (Mahasanghas) have been formed in older MS districts (where the programme has been operational for 3 or more years) during the 10<sup>th</sup> Plan period. These are the forums for providing the strength for collective reflection and action by Sangha women. These federations play a key role in sustaining and nurturing women's empowerment processes at the field level. With the passage of time as the stronger Sanghas become more autonomous in their functioning, they would become federations. These federations then take upon the role of coordination, as well as monitoring and management of structures like the Mahila Shikshan Kendras, naari adalats, health centres, etc. These federations are the "exit strategy" for the programme in older areas.

The National Project Office consisting of a National Project Director, consultants and support staff function as the coordinating body of the project in the Department of School Education and Literacy, MHRD. It provides the secretariat for MS, looks after finance, administration and monitoring of the programme, facilitates evaluations, liaises with international funding agencies and State Governments, co-ordinates with State Programmes for effective implementation of Mahila Samakhya and helps integrate the MS approach with larger educational/women's development programme initiatives.

To concretise the MS experience and meet these varied demands, Resource Centres in MS States and resource groups in districts are the educational resource units which will collate, develop and disseminate gender sensitive strategies, information and pedagogy useful for women's education and empowerment; prepare directories of available resource institutions/people/material; provide translations to reduce time lags in information flows to the field; engage in and initiate research on issues relating to women's development and empowerment. These resource centres network with women's organizations/research bodies/voluntary and government organisations. These resource centres are also the medium for providing information and technical support to the federations in older areas as MS withdraws from implementation in such areas (Mahila Samakhya Education for Women's Equality, Eleventh Plan Document 2016).

### *Experiences of the Programme*

The MS 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 context has validated the fact that the MS approach is 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 (Mahila Samakhya Education for Women's Equality, Eleventh Plan Document 2016). MS has given opportunities to a large number of women with little education, exposure or work experience to move into positions of decisions making thereby ensuring their empowerment. Grassroots level workers (the sahayogini who actually mobilises and organises at the village level) have moved into management positions at the district levels. Social recognition has gradually given way to respect in most villages and the changes are most visible in the public domain. This issue of respect and recognition by the village community is a very critical marker of change for the women (Jandhyala 2003). The MS Programme has far reaching consequences for MS women, their children, families and their community, in that the positive outcomes of programme has spill-over effects over the next generations as well as in the wider community (Janssens 2004). Research has demonstrated the fact that the sanghas have helped their members to exercise their rights and agency, either as a part of a collective or as individuals in their homes (Bhatla and Rajan 2003).

In the nascent stages of sangha formation, women have tended to discuss and act to meet needs like pensions, ration cards, maternity assistance, getting street lights, getting drains cleared, hand-pumps repaired, applying for houses among many others. It is in this process that sanghas have coalesced and learnt their first lessons on how to deal with power structures. This has often been the initial experiencing of empowerment, of taking decisions and collectively seeking to resolve their problems (Jandhyala 2003). MS has clearly been a programme targeted at social change; it has focused strongly on the most vulnerable sections of society so much so that nearly 90% of the sangha membership is drawn from the disadvantaged sections of society. This has further led to the emergence of leadership from the disadvantaged sections of society - prima facie, within women, privileging the interaction of social status represented by caste, tribe or religion and class, both of which often run parallel to each other, is indicated by the membership pattern (Mahila Samakhya 2014: A National Review).

*Education* - Sangha women are often members of the village education committees or school development and management committees. They play an active role in Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) implementation and monitoring. Mahila Samakhya provides resource support to the SSA programme in terms of gender related issues and training and development of textual materials. State MS Societies are also running Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalayas (KGBV) that are formal, girls' residential schools funded under the SSA programme as well as implementing the National Programme for Education of Girls at Elementary Education (NPEGEL) programme for direct support to girl education in educationally backward blocks. Under the Mahila Samakhya Programme, 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. 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 National Institute of Open Schooling (NIOS) (Mahila Samakhya Education for Women's Equality, Eleventh Plan Document 2016). The Mahiti Manthana project is an initiative of IT for Change and its Mysore field centre, Prakriye - Centre for Community Informatics and Development, undertaken in partnership with Mahila Samakhya Karnataka between 2005 and 2009. Since its inception in 2005, the project has primarily aimed at exploring the possibilities offered by community informatics practice for strengthening the empowerment processes of the Sanghas. In most of the rural areas female students drop out of school. MS sanghas adopt various strategies to bring back these girls to school. A very remarkable aspect is the fact that elderly sangha members motivate their female younger generations to avail education and

shoulder the responsibilities of the household and childcare. Key areas through which sanghas have established links with the government education system include scholarships, ensuring mid-day meal, quality fortified food grains, free transport for girls and bus passes, bicycles for girls, enrolment in KGBVs, uniform and other schooling materials, ensuring teacher attendance and adding classes to schools etc. In Varanasi, Uttar Pradesh education centres known as Udan Khatola centres were started during the mid-nineties. They were specifically started to ensure that small children from extremely marginalized and poor groups like Yadav, Muslims, Musahars and Nat could be enrolled in mainstream schools and receive some form of education (Mahila Samakhya 2014: A National Review). A very remarkable aspect of the Mahila Samakhya Programme has been the financial support and degree of voluntarism provide to various educational interventions particularly bridging courses like the Jagjagi centres in Bihar, Bal Mitra Kendras in Andhra Pradesh and Jagriti centres in Assam (Jandhyala 2003).

*Participation in local governance* - High levels of participation by sangha women in institutionalized democratic spaces has been indicated by several studies. MS programme has significantly improved their ability to leave home without permission and increase their political participation (Kandpal et al 2012). Trained field facilitators provide and nurture information and capacity building; develop analytical, decision making and leadership abilities; enable the women to make informed choices and collectively act to bring about change. The sangha women elected to the Panchayat Raj Institutions (PRIs) have brought a critical gender edge to the deliberations of the PRIs. They are also playing a key role in ensuring accountability in governance and implementation of the key programmes being run by the government departments at the grassroots. Sangha women who have become gram panchayat (GP) members have not only been found to be consistently more articulate, aware, assertive and effective as GP members, but appear to be challenging and bringing some change in the conduct and culture of the GP as a whole. Sangha members who become panchayat representatives have several responsibilities vis-à-vis the sangha: they must advocate the sangha's agenda for women's rights and development in the panchayat's decision making processes, they must provide information about the panchayat's decisions and allocation of resources to the sangha and they must inform the sangha of any decisions which are likely to be prejudicial to the interests of the larger constituency of poor woman and their families. In turn, several kind of practical, intellectual and moral support are extended by the sangha to women representatives; they can appeal for the sangha's support in situations where their rights as women, or as panchayat members are being infringed, or their ability to function is being adversely affected; they can continue to access the various learning, awareness and skill-building opportunities provided to the sanghas by MS or other NGOs (Batliwala 1996). There is evidence available indicating that some sanghas advocate for local resources in order to support sangha activities (Mahila Samakhya 2014: A National Review). Reservation and quotas have ensured access to governance structures but Mahila Samakhya has enabled effective use of that access and in so doing, they have checked the capture of spaces and agencies by males (Jha and Menon 2016).

*Health* - Mahila sanghas have taken up various initiatives in the form of training and awareness programmes like general health training where some sangha members are trained as health resource persons; some members work with the National Rural Health Mission; special training on women's reproductive health; training regarding sanitation, child care and cleanliness; immunization campaigns particularly tuberculosis, measles and DTP (diphtheria, tetanus, pertussis) vaccinations; awareness programmes on HIV AIDS, nutrition supplementation and education for adolescent girls etc. Some sanghas have 'Nari Arogya Kendra' and 'Nari Sanjivani Kendra' (women's health centres) primarily at the Block level which is managed by sangha members. In some sanghas, members are trained to identify locally available plants and herbs that can be used to prepare herbal medicines. These medicines can be used for common ailments like cough, fever, cold, headaches, acidity and diarrhoea. As sanghas undertake these activities they have managed to establish their presence and retain their identity at the block level.

*Livelihood concerns* – The MS experience demonstrates the fact that the information gained because of close associations with sanghas has empowered rural women. Hence, there is a demand for training

in the form of skill building that could enable them to generate income or some form of vocation capacity building training. MS has provided vocational training in some parts of the country in non-stereotypical businesses like gas stove repairing, masonry and cycle repairing. However, it needs to be seen that these have not been successful neither in ensuring a dignified life to the trained woman nor in altering the gender dynamics. An analysis of such failures needs a careful study of intersection between gender/feminist politics and poverty before embarking on economic empowerment programmes for women under MS. Studies have indicated that in most instances merely training is not a sufficient factor, there are many necessary conditions like market linkages that are needed to make the training successful. However, sangha members have also received several skill building and vocational training like for instance tailoring, kitchen gardening, vermin-compost making and animal husbandry in convergence with other government departments. While not all of this have translated into economic gain but in some cases sanghas have gained access to credit from the state. In several cases where the sangha has received a loan the members have used it as a revolving fund which is further used to give loans to other women. Several studies have indicated that social awareness training is the forte of the MS programme (Mahila Samakhya 2014: A National Review). Sangha members have managed to create relationships outside of caste and kinship networks, enhance their social capital and diversify their social networks (Kandpal and Baylis 2013).

*Social issues* - 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. 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 others. An active convergence and partnership with Social Justice Committees of Panchayats, District Legal Service Authorities, Structures of DV Act and 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 Nari Adalat is an alternative community adjudication structure that first started in Mahila Samakhya, Gujarat to deal with family disputes. Domestic violence, extra marital relationships, child custody, separation, property matters are adjudicated in a gender sensitive manner. Members of the legal committee of the sangha volunteer with the Nari Adalat. On account of its effectiveness, the Nari Adalat innovation has been institutionalised by the Gujarat State Women's Commission. MS programme resorts to various folk forms of singing in order to disseminate knowledge and information among rural masses on issues like the importance of education for women and girls, women's rights and gender discrimination, laws and rights of women, suffering on account of domestic violence or other gender based forms of violence, need for good health, importance of nutrition and sanitation etc.

Independent research studies support the findings of internal reviews and evaluation reports from various MS states and agree that the programme has had an overall positive impact in terms of expansion of women's agency. Over the years, both MS staff and sangha members have overcome daunting barriers of family, caste and tradition to claim control of their lives and assert an independent identity (Sen 2012). The sangha members have pointed out that the intangible benefits of MS intervention are significant; but the transformative change in their lives is more important than counting the tangible and computable benefits like their access to individual welfare schemes (Mahila Samakhya 2014: A National Review). The impact of MS programme on women's agency particularly on their immediate environment in terms of changes in their relationships with power holders and their positioning within local power hierarchies is quite significant (Sen 2012).

### ***Limitations of the programme***

The lessons of Mahila Samakhya strategies have not been disseminated at higher levels, whether state or national. Further, the focus of national and state leadership of MS was on local action and not to consciously draw/forge linkages to influence national policies for women, or various programmes

targeting women across departments/sectors. Identifying the programme with and locating it within the education department, meant that the lessons MS has to offer to some extent informed initiatives for girls' education such as NPEGEL and KGBV but not the larger Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) or Adult Literacy strategies. The relevance of the MS experience to the whole gamut of the education process and system – be it pedagogy, curriculum or teacher training was, by and large, ignored by SSA.

The 'departmentalisation' of the MS programme has been its greatest weakness and this has also provided MS with the space to continue with localised processes. Its inability to influence policy or practice in the education sector, women-centric programmes of the government or even gender mainstreaming efforts across different social sectors is perhaps the greatest weakness of the MS approach. While there is no single path or formula to catalyse social transformation or gender relations, the big lesson from MS is that one has to engage with localised processes which are rooted. Equally significant is the fact that unless lessons from such initiatives are taken to the macro level through sustained engagement with educational policies/programmes, they will remain as isolated islands with effective local level impacts, which would in all likelihood get subverted or lost in the unchanged macro context. 'Mainstreaming' of such lessons cannot be left to the programme alone but requires the active mediation of other players, notably, researchers, academics and women's organisations. For this to happen, organic partnerships need to be forged as part of the design and implementation of the programme (Ramachandran et al. 2012).

In the Mahila Samakhya 2014: A National Review several bottlenecks in the Mahila Samakhya Programme were highlighted. First, sanghas have limited ability to raise funds or negotiate with formal institutional structures. Sanghas have fairly limited ability to raise funds independently. Support to sanghas from DIUs is mainly non-financial, with most of the sanghas receiving only mobilization (capacity building) support. While sanghas do see funding as of some importance, the desire to run a good sangha through voluntary contribution is a challenge. Despite the fact that the programme has an organised structure and is government sponsored, MS has to struggle in the larger governmental structure. Second, internal management which basically refers to financial sustenance in the federation level is not strong. In a similar vein there are very limited evidences of networking with non-government agencies. Third, federations are not in a position of taking up sustained and long-term collective economic ventures. They have successfully managed to handle social processes but have faltered in the case of economic processes. Fourth, it is often considered that MS is a 'small' programme. This is clearly reflected in case of the amounts allocated towards the programme in the annual budgets which is relatively quiet miniscule compared to other educational programmes. Fifth, MS project offices have witnessed a high turnover in several parts of the country. This is primarily because of the honorarium structures which are relatively poor. In the initial years salary level was not an important factor to retain functionaries but with the advent of better opportunities and incentives provided to trained people by agencies like NGOs, low level of honorarium has become a crucial issue. Finally, training and capacity building of MS functionaries has become difficult because of the turnover (Mahila Samakhya 2014: A National Review).

In the initial years of the programme, several women functionaries expressed that mobility was the biggest challenge that they had to overcome. However, with the passage of time they managed to overcome this challenge and in the process also paved the path for the younger generations to empower themselves. Education enabled these women to raise their voices against the social ills, like rape, alcoholism, domestic violence, etc. prevalent in the society. This was not an easy task because of patriarchy and the power structures in the society. Several women functionaries have provided detailed accounts of their struggles. However, they have acknowledged the fact that because of their involvement with the MS programme their lives have changed for the better.

## **CONCLUSION**

From the above discussion, it is seen that the Mahila Samakhya Programme has played a pivotal role in empowering rural women through education. Education has an intergenerational and spill-over effect and has contributed to social change. The programme has also penetrated to areas like maternal

health, governance, addressing livelihood concerns, raising social issues, vocational training etc. with the objective of creating a gender just society. Women involved in this programme have experienced greater degree of mobility and they yield greater decision-making powers in the private as well as public sphere. Mahila Samakhya Programme is often identified as a 'low-cost' programme. Several studies have pointed out that the expenditure incurred on this programme is quite low in comparison to the objectives that it has achieved. There are several inherent bottlenecks that have affected the Mahila Samakhya Programme. However, the process of mobilisation of poor, rural and uneducated women who had been rendered voiceless and powerless for years is quite remarkable. To conclude, despite the fact that there are several challenges inherent in the programme Mahila Samakhya has been a success story in the sense that it has utilized the voluntarism inherent in the people and community participation for social change and development.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

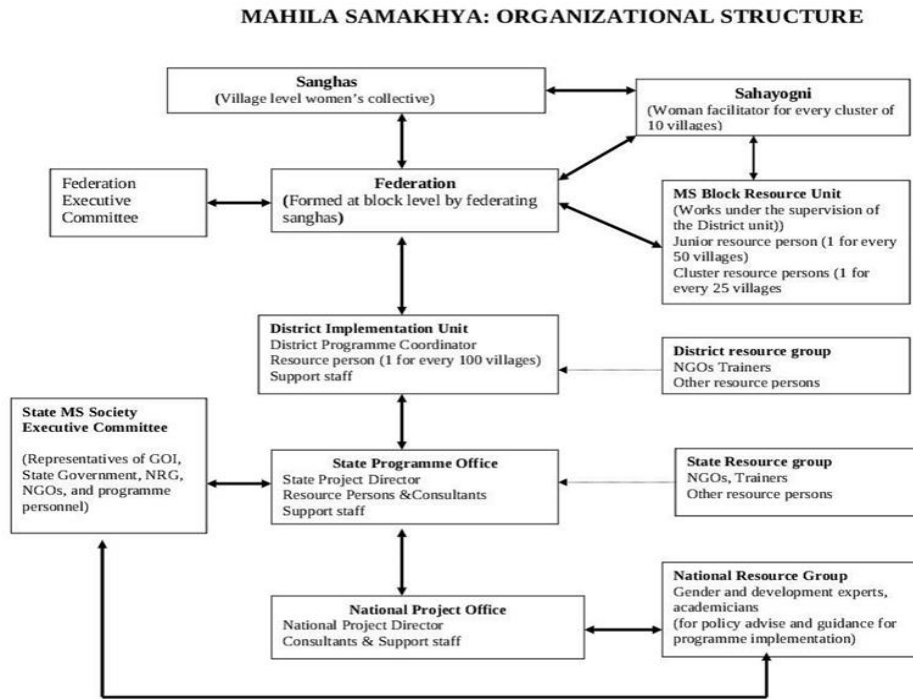
The Central Government had indicated that the Mahila Samakhya Programme will be merged with the National Rural Livelihood Mission (NRLM). This decision has evoked responses from several quarters. Some of the State Governments have decided to continue with the programme in its present form. The MS programme has successfully achieved its desired objectives over the years and has immensely contributed towards other programmes for girls and women. Therefore, it is important for the programme to retain its distinctive identity. It needs to be emphasised that the concerns and grievances of the stakeholders must be addressed by the Government.

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**FIGURE: ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE OF THE MAHILA SAMAKHYA (MS) PROGRAMME**



Source: [mhrd.gov.in/sites/upload\\_files/mhrd/files/MSorganogram.pdf](http://mhrd.gov.in/sites/upload_files/mhrd/files/MSorganogram.pdf), Retrieved on May 6 2020.