

**To
The Honourable Minister, Ministry of HRD
Shastri Bhavan**

26 October 2015

We are a group of independent women's rights activists, researchers, academics and scholars who have been associated with the Mahila Samakhya (MS) programme at different points since its inception over two decades ago - as members of the National Resource Group (NRG) and non-official members on the Executive Committees of State MS societies; as trainers and resource-persons with state teams; as members of evaluation missions; as researchers on women's empowerment in India; and as activists who have learnt from and been enriched by the rich experience of this unique programme.

We write to you to share our concerns around the reported decision of the Government of India to close the MS programme at the end of the current financial year. We understand MS State societies have been asked to begin negotiations with their counterparts the National Rural Livelihoods Mission (NRLM) at the State level to discuss a possible merger of MS with NRLM.

We are surprised and alarmed at the decision particularly since there has been no consultation on this issue with the National Resource Group (NRG), which had been tasked with revisioning the programme to match the changing context and meet emerging challenges. The reports of the NRG Working Groups were tabled at the last meeting of the NRG (held on 19 August 2014), with a focus on proposals and strategies that would enable MS to engage with and address issues of inclusion, gender equity and equality in key programmes such as Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA), Rashtriya Madhyamik Shiksha Abhiyan (RMSA), National Rural Livelihoods Mission (NRLM) and National Rural Health Mission (NRHM).

The rationale for a merger of MS with NRLM is also unclear, given that an independent evaluation commissioned by the Ministry of Education and undertaken by IIM Ahmedabad in 2014 strongly recommended expansion of the scheme.

Given the absence of any formal announcement, we hope that there is still space for discussion on the future of MS. We are firmly of the view that MS should continue as an independent programme, albeit with the adaptations and modification necessary to ensure its continued relevance and impact.

The closure of a government scheme is usually predicated on its lack of impact and effectiveness, irrelevance and/or duplication with other schemes. None of these premises apply to the MS programme. We therefore urge the Government of India to consider the following points while deciding the future of the scheme.

1. Impact and effectiveness

The most recent independent evaluation conducted by IIM, Ahmedabad provides convincing data to show that the MS programme has been successful in expanding the horizons, improving the lives and transforming the world-views of poor women in the 44,446 villages where it has

been working. The findings of the independent evaluation by IIM-Ahmedabad in 2014 are unequivocal¹ and are summarised below.

Box 1.
Findings of the independent evaluation (2014)

1. *The MS programme seems to have had a **significant imprint on local issues** of gender and development. While it is not possible to attribute this to MS alone, there is little doubt that sangha women have developed **empowered identities and voices** in most MS communities.*
2. *The signs of success are not necessarily evident in the resolution or elimination of problems that have particularly impacted marginalized women — although several such examples were also identified — but in the **contestation of spaces** from which these women have been historically excluded and the **challenges to discriminatory practices**.*
3. *The contestation of gender-based discrimination has occurred at several levels, including **visibility in the public sphere** – acts like collectively singing songs, or through more obvious acts like rallies and protests.*
4. *There is evidence of change in the private sphere as well, through **greater voice** in household decisions as well as **increased mobility**.*
5. *There is strong evidence of **high levels of participation in institutionalized democratic spaces** by sangha women; 96 per cent of the sanghas rated their participation in gram sabha meetings as regular; 86.4% of the individual members surveyed report regular participation in the gram sabha. This picture is corroborated by non-members as well. The importance of this participation is best realized when placed in the context of the narratives of historical exclusion of women in public spaces that were cited during the study.*
6. *Eighty-one per cent of the old sanghas and 58 per cent of the newer sanghas replied with specific examples on the action they have taken to demand access to government services and benefits from the authorities/panchayats.*
7. *In over 55 per cent of surveyed sanghas, sangha members have **competed in elections** and gone on to win posts like Sarpanch, membership in Ward Committees and Panchayats.*
8. *The social and institutional challenges that sangha members still face is evident from the fact that only 27 per cent of sanghas report members of sanghas being part of the PRI committees. Even among sanghas where members have not stood for elections themselves, a majority report participation in the conduct of the electoral process.*
9. *The high levels of participation by sangha women are also reflected in the fact that over 80 percent of sanghas were able to articulate **explicit issues** that had been raised by sangha women in gram sabha meetings. The issues raised by sanghas include those related to **local infrastructure and government services and schemes**.*
10. *Sanghas have contributed to the **provision of local public goods**. In addition, several sanghas reported working with local governments on election cards, relief work and the pulse polio programme.*
11. *Most of the sanghas emphatically stress that their enthusiasm and willingness to participate has either been maintained or gone up over the years. Where they have gone up the reasons seem to be*

1 Report of National Review of MS, 2014. (pages 12-13)

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success in taking up cases related to harassment of women, development work related to education and agencies like the public distribution system, and the increased confidence while talking to government functionaries. In addition, the feeling that **knowledge and awareness** have increased also adds to the motivation.

12. Collective processes can often be exclusionary by privileging those who are able to participate in the process and ignoring others who are voluntarily or involuntarily excluded. But sangha women have been able to use their “empowered” positions to bring about changes in their communities that **challenge historical gender-based exclusions**. In a few sanghas, women have formed issue-specific committees or taken up activities that have benefited all women or the entire village.
13. The diversity of issues raised by the sanghas speaks to the non-target oriented nature of MS. It is evident that the issues being raised were **context dependent and locally demanded**. Thus, a clear contrast to sector-specific, target-oriented programmes is observed. However, the process of change has been helped by broader changes in society in recent times which have supported the principles that MS has emphasized right from its early days.
14. The status of a sangha as an **independent collective entity of marginalized women** puts it in a unique position to handle cases of violence against women. The sanghas often see taking up such issues as a matter of responsibility. This is perhaps one of the most significant social interventions that the sanghas have made.
15. The sanghas’ work often puts them in conflict with powerful local actors, but by and large, the sanghas have persevered in their efforts.
16. MS’s emphasis on working with marginalized women has interestingly implied that challenges to discriminatory norms and practices have not been restricted to the sphere of gender alone. There are a few examples of this extending to caste discrimination. This is to be expected given MS’s **focus on multiple modes of discrimination and oppression**.

MS has been internationally recognised for its unique approach to women’s education and empowerment, its innovative strategies and its impressive ground level presence. Case studies of MS interventions have featured regularly as ‘best practices’ in publications by UN agencies including UNICEF, UNDP and UNESCO. Several independent scholars and institutions have conducted path-breaking studies based on the MS experience. Most importantly GOI has regularly highlighted the MS programme in its compliance reports on CEDAW and other international conventions that it is a signatory to.

2. Continued relevance

The MS vision of women’s education for empowerment and development are even more valid and relevant given the country’s commitment to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and enter into the Digital Age. Seven out of the 17 SDGs (ending poverty, improving food security and nutrition, ensuring inclusive quality education, gender equality, sustainable management of water and sanitation, build peace and justice, and strengthen institutions to build inclusive societies) have a direct relationship to MS and can draw on its strategies and experience.

The independent evaluation confirms that MS has been successful in deploying an empowering

education process to enable marginalised women to enter the public domain, acquire voice and agency, and contribute to meeting national goals on education and development of women and girls.

Further, the success of the programme in reaching out to the most excluded social groups and in enabling women to challenge and stop adverse social practices such as child marriage, caste discrimination and regressive traditions such as the *devadasi* system, stand testimony to its effectiveness. The lessons of these experiences suggest that MS can greatly strengthen the efforts of the government to address falling child sex ratios through initiatives such as the *Beti Bachao Beti Padhao* initiative.

3. Women's literacy and girls' education

When MS started out, women's literacy rates and school enrolment figures for girls were abysmally low. Today, 30 years later, we can proudly say that India has made great progress in women's education. Significant gains made have been in terms of increased enrolment of girls, especially from marginalised communities, and in improving female literacy rates. While MS alone cannot claim the improved results, the fact remains that it has been a significant factor in the achievement of these results.

MS has specifically focused on the poorest and most marginalised communities in Educationally Backward Blocks of the country. It has had a visible influence that goes far beyond its operational area: for instance, it has played a critical role in developing and testing models for community mobilisation and innovative strategies for girls and women's education, and has spearheaded the mainstreaming of gender equality concerns within education and other social sector programmes.

These achievements have already been recognised at state level, where MS teams are called on to share their in-depth understanding of community needs and priorities. The MS programme is recognised as a resource group on issues such as mobilisation of School Management Committees, strengthening women's involvement in panchayats and building community awareness on health (to list only a few examples).

MS was the first programme to launch residential educational programmes for girls. The Mahila Shikshan Kendra, a hugely successful and internationally-lauded model for girls' education, has been mainstreamed into the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (under the label of Residential Bridge Courses) and has served as the template for Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalayas.

MS primers and learning materials developed by MS in the early 1990 have been incorporated within the Saakshar Bharat scheme. MS has also built close partnerships with Saakshar Bharat in some States.

In several States, MS functions as a gender resource centre providing training and technical services to other government departments and programmes as well as civil society organisations.

4. Women's empowerment

Starting in the late 1980s, MS has been a pioneer in developing the model of *sanghas* (collectives) of marginalised women to address issues of exclusion and inequality. The Self Help Group (SHG) model came later and focused on the limited agenda of providing micro-credit.

Evidence from global studies is leading policy-makers to conclude that women's groups and federations built solely on the SHG model are not as sustainable or empowering as they were earlier thought to be. In contrast, all evaluations of MS – including the most recent independent evaluation - have noted that the number and robustness of MS initiated sanghas and federations is a record that few if any “sector specific and target-oriented” government programmes can match.

As a matter of fact, SHGs in several states have turned to MS sanghas and coordinated with their activities as a strategy of expanding their own horizons beyond just economic empowerment.

The MS experience proves that expansion of women's autonomy, agency and voice cannot come about through atomised initiatives for “economic empowerment”, “political empowerment”, “legal empowerment” and so on. This complex and holistic understanding of empowerment is not confined to the programme document – it is clearly and strongly articulated by sangha members.

“The sangha members point out that the intangible benefits of MS intervention are significant; they feel the transformative change in their lives is more important than counting the tangible and computable benefits like their access to individual welfare schemes. This is a lesson the sanghas studied offer unambiguously.”

The MS approach of building women's self-confidence, enabling access to information and building leadership skills has enabled several lakh women to participate in the public domain (for instance as panchayat members) and demand accountability of government services.

5. Women's education and empowerment: unfinished agendas

Though India has achieved significant success in bringing women into the mainstream of development, the task of preparing them to tackle new and emerging challenges still remains.

- Although women's literacy rates have increased, the gender gap is still significant and stands at 16.6% (Census 2011).
- Literacy levels have gone up for SC women (56.5%) and ST women (49.4%) but are still low, with variations among States.
- While enrolment rates have gone up, dropout rates continue to be high for girls, especially amongst marginalised communities.
- The transition rate to secondary schooling for girls is low, and the focus on secondary education is very recent.
- Even as access is expanding, quality remains a serious concern.
- As ICTs expand their coverage, a digital divide has also been created. Women will need to be equipped with access to new skills to enable them to take advantage of ICTs.

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- The dynamic process of empowerment has not yet touched a sizeable section of women, particularly those from SC/ST and other marginalised communities.

MS has been re-inventing itself to address new issues as well as continuing challenges: increased violence against women; increasing prevalence of particular forms of discrimination like sex-selection and witch hunting; continuing practices such as early marriage; strengthening economic empowerment and skill development and bridging the digital divide, amongst others.

The escalation of violence against women and girls and the emergence of new forms of violence are matters of national concern. MS is the only grassroots programme to address this issue at a significant scale. The *Nari Adalats* run by MS *sanghas* have delivered gender justice as well as social justice. The government should actively consider upscaling and building on this work.

MS also stands out for its deep conceptual and functional understanding of gender issues. Over the years, MS has developed outstanding expertise in gender training and facilitation of gender mainstreaming within other programmes.

Besides the range of domain expertise, the human resource pool developed by MS enriches and contributes to development all the way from the village to the State level. It would be a huge loss to the nation if these resources - developed by women through their own endeavours and investment through the MS programme over nearly three decades - were to be lost or weakened through a hasty closure of the programme.

6. The way forward: our proposals

1. **Enable and facilitate expanded and planned convergence between MS and other government programmes.** MS should be seen as a resource that can contribute to and enrich a range of programmes. A merger, whether with NRLM or any other programme, would require the unique, time-tested and established components of MS to be subsumed within a programme structure designed for different set of goals and objectives. MS and NRLM would both be better served by working in partnership to leverage each others' strengths and advantages.
2. **Strengthen and accelerate the process of setting up State-level Gender Resource Centres** as an institutional mechanism to allow MS to service gender needs of all departments and programmes. The structure can also cascade down to district and block levels for partnerships with other departments and institutions.
3. **Protect the unique ability of the programme to reach out to the most marginalised women with an empowering learning process.** The programme has already begun a process of withdrawal from older districts – this should be done in a manner that assures the sustainability of the MS Federations. Even if MS needs to be moved out of the elementary education sector, an appropriate location should be identified such that the broad focus on education remains unaffected. Dialogue and discussion with stakeholders at national and State levels can help to identify the optimal location of MS.

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4. **Strengthen and build on the commitment and skills of women whose lives have been transformed by MS.** It is essential to provide continued support to *sangha* members and programme functionaries who have given the best years of their lives to building the programme. The *sangha* is built through the voluntary participation of the poorest rural women without any remuneration or material benefits. *Sangha* members, whose lives have been transformed by MS, have been inspiring and supporting other women in their journeys towards education and empowerment. Programme functionaries at different levels have also poured their passion and commitment into the mission of women's empowerment for over two decades. Closing MS would block these empowered women from influencing the course of development and advancing the sustainable development goals, and would be a huge loss to the nation.

Mahila Samakhya is acknowledged as the only government programme to successfully implement a holistic approach to women's empowerment. Given the urgent need for reaching out to millions of women whose lives have not yet been touched by this process, it would be logical to **expand the scale and reach of the MS programme to cover all those districts with low indicators of women's development.**

We urge you to consider our proposals for the future of MS and its continuance as an independent and autonomous programme. We would be happy to meet with you at your convenience to answer any queries and take this discussion forward.

Yours faithfully,

1. Prof Sharada Jain, former Chairperson NRG, educationist
2. Vimala Ramachandran, first National Project Director MS (1989 -1992)
3. Nishi Mehrotra, Chairperson NRG, Gender & Education specialist.
4. Sister M Sujita, former SPD Bihar MS, member NRG educationist.
5. Kameshwari Jandhyala, former SPD APMSS and former Member NRG, Director ERU Consultants.
6. Veena Padia, former SPD Gujarat MS, Theme Leader on Gender & Financial Literacy, SIDBI.
7. Prof Manju Agarwal, former SPD UPMS, Director Amity Institute of Behavioural and Allied Sciences.
8. Padmavathi Yedla, former SPD AP Mahila Samatha, expert on Child Protection, UNICEF Nigeria.
9. P Prashanti, former SPD AP Mahila Samatha and Telengana MS, President Bhumika Collective Hyderabad.
10. Abha Bhैया, former member NRG, former Consultant MS National Office, Jagori and Jagori Rural.
11. Lakshmi Krishnamurthy, Member NRG, anthropologist and researcher in education and theatre.
12. Renuka Mishra, Member NRG, researcher Gender & Education.
13. Vandana Mahajan, Member NRG, former Consultant MS National Office, practitioner on gender equality and education.
14. Kalyani Menon-Sen, Member NRG, former Consultant MS National Office (1993-1996), Feminist Learning Partnerships.

Friends of Mahila Samakhya

15. Malini Ghose, Member NRG, researcher (Gender & Education).
16. Annie Namala, Member NRG, former Director Centre for Social Equity and Inclusion, Dalit rights activist.
17. Soma KP, Member NRG, independent researcher on Gender, Sustainable Development and Livelihoods.
18. Anita Gurumurthy, Member NRG, Director IT for Change.
19. Jayawati Srivastava, former member NRG, educationist and writer.
20. Prof Anjali Dave, former member NRG, Professor TISS, Mumbai.
21. Ammu Joseph, former Member NRG, independent journalist and author.
22. Runu Chakraborty, former Member NRG, former Consultant UPMS, women's rights activist.
23. Dr Manisha Priyam, former Consultant MS National Office, senior academic.
24. Taranga Sriraman, former Consultant MS National Office, Programme Coordinator, Resource Centre on Violence Against Women, TISS Mumbai.
25. Latha Govind, former Consultant MS UP, Education specialist.
26. Dr Geeta Menon, Gender & Education specialist.
27. Prof Ankur Sarin, IIM Ahmedabad, team member MS evaluation (2014).
28. Shalini Joshi, women's rights activist, *Khabar Lahariya*.
29. Prof Nitya Rao, Member Joint Evaluation Mission (2008), senior academic (Gender and Development).
30. Dr Dhir Jhingran, former Director MHRD and Principal Secretary Govt of Assam, Director Language and Learning Foundation.
31. Padmaja Nair, former Member Advisory Board MS UP, development professional (WASH and Slum Development).
32. Prof Lakshmi Lingam, Deputy Director, Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai.
33. Dr Shobita Rajagopal, Associate Professor, Institute of Development Studies Jaipur.
34. Prof Kanchan Mathur, Institute of Development Studies Jaipur.
35. K Satyavati, feminist writer and trainer, Editor Bhumika Patrika, Hyderabad.
36. Pamela Philipose, senior journalist.
37. Juhi Jain feminist activist and writer
38. Preethi Krishnan, researcher, Purdue University
39. Anuradha Kapoor, Director Swayam Kolkata
40. Prof Pavan Mamidi, IIM Ahmedabad
41. Prof Navdeep Mathur, IIM Ahmedabad
42. Prof Kavitha Ranganathan, IIM Ahmedabad
43. Prof Rajeev Sharma, IIM Ahmedabad
44. Dr Cherian Joseph, Human Resource Advisory.