
Together We Can: The role of women's action groups as agents of social and economic change in India

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Project abstract:

The research project sought to evaluate the impact of Mahila Samakhya (MS), one of the largest women's empowerment programme in India. Started in 1986, the Mahila Samakhya (MS) program mobilized vulnerable women at the grassroots level, using a collective action approach to help women become empowered agents of society. At the time of the study, it was one of the world's largest government funded women's empowerment program, serving around 1.2 million women across 10 Indian states. Anecdotal evidence suggested that the process set up by MS approach had been effective in uplifting women's social and economic status. However, rigorous evidence of MS's impact on women's economic empowerment was lacking. The process by which women engaged with the economic aspect of the MS empowerment process and the outcomes of this engagement was also invisible. In keeping with this background, the specific objectives of the project were: (1) To evaluate the impact of Mahila Samakhya (MS) programme on economic empowerment of women, and (2) to raise awareness and influence policies towards women among the government functionaries, academics, media, and civil society. The study was conducted in two states in India: Bihar and Karnataka from 2015 to 2018. During the course of the study, the programme was shut down in April of 2016 in all but three states of the country. Karnataka received funding, but Bihar was not able to receive any funding and was subsequently closed down. Consequently, each of the states has a different focus and methodology and therefore, has collated and analysed very different kinds of data. The Bihar study was a cross-sectional design that examined the long-, medium- and short-term effects of the MS programme on empowerment of women in three districts in Bihar. A one-time survey was used to collect quantitative data on women's economic empowerment, and the qualitative component used ethnography through case studies, focus groups, participation observation, and unstructured informal interviews. Institutional data in terms of participation in local governing structures was also collected in Bihar. Additionally, we were able to acquire ancillary material such as training books and props, posters, photographs, annual reports, and even accounting books. The Karnataka study was based on a randomised experiment (RCT) to evaluate impact of MS on women's economic empowerment and citizenship in one district of Haveri. The baseline data was collected using a survey measuring indicators of social and economic empowerment, and the qualitative data consisted of an intensive 2-year embedded ethnography that documented daily activities of the process with participation observation as the primary mode of data collection. An end line for the Karnataka study was planned, but was not able to be executed because of bureaucratic issues in the field.

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Project and author details

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In India, social norms have traditionally deprived women of power in social and economic spheres. Women living in rural areas and belonging to lower classes are particularly vulnerable to disempowering social pressures. Started in 1986, the Mahila Samakhya (MS) program mobilizes vulnerable women at the grassroots level, using a collective action approach to help women become empowered agents of society. At the time that the project started, MS was one of the world’s largest government funded women’s empowerment program, serving around 1.2 million women across 10 Indian states. At the time, there was no rigorous evidence of MS’s impact on women’s economic empowerment. Moreover, the process by which women engage with the economic aspect of the MS empowerment process and the outcomes of this engagement, or even the challenges of this approach was largely invisible. So, the project sought to evaluate the impact of the MS programme on economic empowerment of women. As the project was in its first year, there were indications that the programme would be shut down. Partly due to this, another specific objective that emerged was to raise awareness and influence policies towards women among the government functionaries, academics, media and civil society about the approach the MS took.

The project had two sites of study: Bihar and Karnataka. For both the states, the research framework and methodology used were mixed-methodology, employing both quantitative and qualitative methods and data. The Bihar Research Design was based on a cross-sectional study that examined the long-, medium- and short-term effects of the MS programme on social and economic change, across three districts – Muzaffarpur, Kaimur, and Katihar – in Bihar. The quantitative component used a one-time survey to understand changes in the economic empowerment of women in the three districts. The qualitative component used ethnography in the form of narrative analysis through case studies, participation observation, and unstructured informal interview. The Karnataka Research Design is based on a randomised experiment (RCT) to evaluate impact of MS on women’s economic empowerment and citizenship, by examining the expansion of MS in the district of Haveri. The quantitative component is primarily in the form of randomised control trials (RCTs), and the qualitative component used embedded ethnography primarily in the form of participation observation.

In addition to these specific forms of data, because the programme was shutting down in Bihar, we also conducted a review of certain source documents as part of the primary research. Using documents like the minutes of meetings held for governance structures such as (i) Village Education Committee/ Vidyalaya Shiksha Samiti/ School Management Committee – SMC (known differently at different time periods) and (ii) Gram Panchayat, we tried to understand the participation of women in political positions. Apart from all of this data, we also collected artefacts such as training materials and props, posters, photographs, annual reports, and some accounting books from a few sites in Bihar.

A book focusing on the Bihar study has been published, and a report on the Karnataka data has been generated. In addition, we also have a dedicated website (<https://grow.cbps.in>) that provides the required information and links to various resources. We also collected a lot of visual material, including photographs and videos, which form the basis for 10 short clips and a short documentary on the methodology that we followed in the study. All of this information collated was done with the express consent of the participants and all of them were made aware that the data that they shared would be published in an open forum for access. Those whose faces and names are visible in the visual material have consented to their images being shared on open media

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Data description

Description	Format and justification	Volume
Survey data collected for Karnataka	Available in Stata and Excel. We were analysing the data through these software packages, and therefore, it is available in this format.	4 GB
Survey data collected for Bihar	Available in Stata and Excel. We were analysing the data through these software packages, and therefore, it is available in this format.	20 GB
Field notes and observations for Karnataka	Available in MS Word and PDF formats. The field investigator wrote it in Telugu and these were translated into English. Both versions are available.	2 GB
Field notes and observations for Bihar	Available in Word and PDF formats. The field investigator wrote it in Hindi and these were translated into English. Both versions are available.	4 GB
Desk review of institutional data	A MS word report essaying out the major findings is available.	1 GB
Institutional artefacts (training materials, annual reports, accounting books etc.)	All the books and artefacts are stored in a cupboard in the premises of CBPS and have not been digitised. They have been catalogued and a digital copy of the catalogue in MS Excel is available.	Unknown
Visual material (video and photographs)	All photographs (after processing but before anonymisation) are available in JPG files. Raw footage of the video is no longer available, but processed video is available online in the designated website: https://grow.cbps.in	1.1 TB
Publications	All links to publications are available in the designated website: https://grow.cbps.in	Not applicable

Because the study was conducted in two states and three forms of data was collected – quantitative, qualitative, and document review – there are five ways in which the data was collected, and each of them will be described in brief here:

Karnataka quantitative data collection: The quantitative methodology in Karnataka was primarily based on an RCT designed to assess the effect of the MS programme on women’s economic empowerment. There was a baseline study conducted; however, we were unable to complete an end line because of a number of issues related to the field. The baseline survey was conducted in Haveri in blocks where MS had not yet conducted any activities: Byadghi, Hirekerur, Shiggoan and Hangal. The research methodology for the quantitative survey employed a cluster randomised controlled experiment in which the MS programme would be administered only in certain clusters (made of ten villages) with the cooperation and consent of the MS programme. The primary idea was to randomly assign clusters to the MS programme, so that these clusters would act as the intervention areas and ensure that a similar number of clusters be identified where the MS programme would not enter (during the study period only) which would then act as the non-intervention areas. We intended to employ a difference-in-difference comparison to measure the change over time between households in intervention and non-intervention clusters.

In Haveri district in Karnataka, we divided the four blocks (sub-district level) into clusters of ten villages each. From this set of clusters, we randomly assigned 15 clusters to receive the MS programme for the moment and 15 clusters to not receive the MS programme for the moment. Given that MS moves from village to village only in a progressive manner, it was decided that these non-intervention villages are the ones that MS was not likely to approach until after the study period was completed. This measure was primarily taken to ensure that we did not hinder the MS roll-out process by any means. Thus, a total of 300 villages formed the sample area constituting 150 treatment villages and 150 control villages. From each village, 13 households were surveyed which includes the desired sample of 10 households per village and an additional 3 households per village to account for any attrition or non-availability of the respondents due to migration or any other reasons, for midline and endline surveys. In total, about 3900 households (1950 treatment households and 1950 control households) were surveyed from all 30 clusters. Sample households were randomly drawn from a listing exercise, during which a household census of each study village to collect information about address, household members, caste and other demographic indicators were collected. From this list of households, we randomly selected 13 households from each village for the survey process.

In total, 3,893 households across 299 villages were selected for the survey. In the final analysis, three households were dropped due to the inadequate information available in the questionnaire. Additionally, 30 women were dropped from the survey because the respondents were identified to be outside the age criterion (14 to 59) for the survey, meaning they were either too young or too old. During the survey, a village was also dropped because of an ethical issue that was raised in the field. So, for the final analysis, we have interviews with 3,860 women in 299 villages.

The survey contained questions related to many dimensions of women’s economic empowerment. Prominent among them was women’s participation in economic activities. This was captured by asking questions related to women’s employment in paid work and their savings. We also included measures that documented women’s autonomy and decision-making abilities within the household. These questions captured the dynamics in the household with respect to control over income, mobility, autonomy, and social role within the household. Another important dimension that measured was women’s access and use of information related to rights and entitlements. We also measured literacy skills among women as well as their experience of violence in their life time. In addition, we attempted to measure women’s agency through particular indicators of self-efficacy that allowed us a modicum of understanding of women’s confidence and belief in themselves

Based on these questions, we were able to capture certain dimensions of women’s lives that helped us to assess the current status of economic empowerment of women in Haveri.

Karnataka qualitative data collection: The main component of the qualitative approach consisted of an in-depth embedded ethnography, primarily through participation observation by a research assistant who was located in the district of Haveri and accompanied one of the MS workers to the field, five days of the week. Her daily observations, questions, and discussions with the women and with the MS personnel on the ground as well as in the field office, documented in the form of field notes, form the bulk of our ethnographic material. This ethnographic material is augmented by observations made by three of the Bangalore team members who also visited the field approximately every two months for two to three days. Due to the fact that the programme didn’t really have the resources to scale for the *sangha* to mature, the bulk of the ethnographic material is restricted to the process by which MS was able to form groups. Despite this obvious gap, we were able to gain rich insights into the process of group formation, the problems and resistances associated with it, the initial discussions and the week-to-week or month-to-month conversations about various activities in the groups. These conversations and discussions form the basis of our analysis examining the dynamics and institutionalisation of the empowerment process, especially at a time of crisis.

Bihar quantitative data collection: We have used propensity score matching (PSM) technique to identify the non-intervention villages comparable with the intervention villages in Bihar, adopting a quasi-experimental approach and aid in estimation of the effects of the MS programme on economic empowerment of women in Bihar varying by duration of exposure.

Our targeted sample size constituted of 3,000 respondents from 300 villages or 1,000 respondents from 100 villages in each of the three districts of Muzaffapur, Kaimur, and Katihar, divided equally between MS and non-MS villages in each of the district.

Our sampling strategy was to ensure that MS and Non-MS groups are equivalent and distributed independently and identically. The sample selection process was undertaken in three stages. The first stage involved the identification of the three districts which would constitute our long, medium and short-term study sites. We held several rounds of consultations with MSB officials at both state and district level to facilitate this process. In the second stage, we identified and selected the villages within each district on the basis of SC and ST population and female literacy rate using propensity score matching technique (PSM). At the next stage, we selected respondents in the selected MS and non-MS villages.

For the MS sample, we collected the name, husband's name, and socio-economic profile of MS members in each of the selected MS villages from the MSB officials. This list was, then, used by our survey team to visit the village and collect information on the MS member's caste, BPL status, and their availability for the survey. We then randomly selected ten MS members in each village for our survey. A listing process was adopted to identify the potential Non-MS sample belonging to BPL households, with emphasis given to OBC, SC, ST and minority households. The individual respondents from the general category was included only if there were no households belonging to OBC or SC or ST or minority households in the village. Even then, only those households which were BPL were selected for the sample. Similar to selection of MS members, we randomly selected ten individuals from the listing process for our survey.

In sum, our sampling strategy ensured (i) that our sample was distributed independently and identically, (ii) there was equivalence between MS and Non-MS groups established, and (iii) that the individual MS members had joined MSB during our period of interest. This was adopted to facilitate the estimation of long, medium and short-term ATET of MSB on overall economic empowerment of rural women. We had targeted about 500 MS and 500 non-MS respondents in each of the districts. In Muzaffarpur, the survey was completed for 419 MS and 488 non-MS respondents from 48 MS and 50 Non-MS villages. In Kaimur, the survey was conducted in 43 MS and 43 non-MS villages and about 463 MS and 509 non-MS respondents were surveyed from these villages. In Katihar, the survey was conducted in all the targeted 100 villages covering a total of 490 MS and 490 Non-MS respondents.

The survey questionnaire was very similar on the indicators that we asked of our Karnataka questionnaires, as we had intended for both of the information to be comparable. The information is not repeated here for the sake of brevity.

Bihar qualitative data collection: The ethnographic research used a tiered approach incorporating multiple methods of local immersion in the field and was conducted only in MS areas. The methods used included participant observation, semi-structured interviews, reflexive workshops and focus group discussions (FGDs) and the development of individual narratives. In addition, we also conducted a review of certain source documents as part of the primary research. Using documents like the minutes of the meetings held for governance structures such as (i) Village Education Committee/ VidyalayaShikshaSamiti/School Management Committee – SMC (known differently at different time periods) and (ii) Gram Panchayat, we sought to understand the participation of women in locations where MS had been operational. This analysis was carried out systematically for a small sub-sample of the survey.

Our first trip to all the field sites was to collect all secondary literature, policy documents, and any documentation or artefacts that were located in the field office sites. At this time, we also conducted detailed interviews with all the district-level officials to under the history and dynamics of the programme in those districts as well as identify key informants and resource persons who would facilitate our entry into the field. Our entry into the ethnographic field was undertaken by a researcher who travelled to the field sites in each of the field sites in the above mentioned dates. After gaining entry through introductions to the groups, we familiarised ourselves with the dynamics of different groups or federations (as the case may be) in the district. Based on the dynamics in the groups or federations, we identified certain individuals or communities to focus on. In the initial phase of the entry into the field, daily observations and informal discussions with the women (in the group or federations) as well as the MS officials were predominant. Once a sense of the MS process that was functioning within that district was established, we moved into identifying certain informants who would be able to articulate particular processes such as the day-to-day functioning of the sangha/federation, the challenges faced, the trainings attended, as well as the transformations that they themselves have undergone. After this, depending on the district, we focused on ensuring that we got a sense of the dynamics within the family of a few of the sangha/federation individuals, as well as the dynamics of the village by interviewing Panchayat members or elders in the group. Where available, we also hosted a few focus group discussion with adolescent boys and girls in villages where we were able to establish trust.

In certain cases, depending on the consent of the participants and our specific interest, an extended case study method was also used to build case studies. These case studies were used to describe specific configuration of events in the lives of these women that would allow for us to understand specific dynamics that are important to understand the dynamics of implementing a women's empowerment programme. These case studies often take into consideration the viewpoint of others within the frame that enabled us to get a better perspective of the realities of the empowerment process. We also used this method to capture contradictions, regressions, and outliers in our data.

The observations, interviews, and focus groups conducted in the field were recorded systematically in field notes, the translations of which formed the bulk of our ethnographic material. This ethnographic material was augmented by observations made by two of the Bangalore team members who also visited the field approximately every month for about a week.

During this process of data collection, visual material such as photographs and video was also generated with the express consent of all those who participated.

Numerous studies have been done on the MS philosophy and methodology. But there have been very few studies that have been done that has collated the following data:

1. Long-term, medium-term, short-term qualitative and quantitative data on the impact of MS on women's lives in Bihar.
2. Quantitative baseline data on indicators of economic empowerment in Karnataka and intensive qualitative process information on the methodology employed by MS.
3. Desk-review of all documentation related to participation of women in governing processes in Bihar.
4. Training books and props, posters, photographs, annual reports, and even accounting books from Bihar.
5. Films and clips made about the programme as well as the project.

Given the diversity and richness of the data, the different narratives present in the data, it would be important to preserve, archive, and share this information to those who are interested in women's empowerment. A peculiarity of this project and the importance of creating a repository of this data is that MS has been shut down in all but three states. So, more than twenty years of information regarding collectivisation of women has been effectively lost. Because the shutdown was very sudden, there was no organised move to archive any of the rich material that was generated since the inception of the programme in 1996. As we were in the field during this time, we were able to access some material as well as closely examine and document the lives of women who were impacted by the programme. At the micro-level, the data documents both in qualitative and quantitative terms, the impact that the programme has made on several socio-economic indicators such as education, inter-generational impact and self-efficacy. Additionally, it qualitatively focuses on the emotional, social and economic losses that women experience when such an empowerment programme shuts down.

More centrally, the data that we collected documents the philosophy and methodology of a women's empowerment programme that worked in the most marginalised of areas and was able to expand its impact to at least 1.2 million women. So, the methodologies that it employed for both for in-depth and scalable impact has significant implications to understand the institutional structures and organisational processes required for the large-scale deployment of any women's empowerment programme. Moreover, because MS was State-run programme, its subsequent closure has led to a

re-examination of the role of the State in instituting these methodologies. It has also led to some efforts to ensure that the methodology of MS is documented, translated, and transposed to other social contexts. All of this data, therefore, is critical to these efforts and should be accessible to all who are working in this area.

Although we have never used metadata, we will be in a position to provide information on the identification, location and retrieval of information resources by users. There are some words that are unique to the MS programme and unique to the process of implementation, all of which can be provided to create context for understanding the data that has been uploaded. So, we will be able to provide, to a large extent, descriptive metadata. However, no one in the team is currently in a position to produce technical or administrative metadata that appears to be descriptions of a technical process used to produce or use the archival material. For example, while we might be able to create some level of administrative metadata in accessing quantitative or qualitative data, it is not clear to us how to create a metadata that would be used to access artefacts. Guidance on this will be required for us to engage with whether those forms of metadata can be produced by the team. Speaking, however, in general terms, the archival material can be accompanied by extensive information on the nature of its production as well as the contexts that produced it.

Ethical and Legal issues

We do not have any ethical issues that will complicate the publication of the data. The data was generated with the express purpose of sharing it openly. This was communicated clearly and repeatedly with everyone who participated in the study and refusal to participate or share names were taken seriously. However, we do have to go through the process of anonymisation for most of the qualitative work and the quantitative data before we share the data publicly.

No.

Ideally, we would like to share our data under Creative Commons License under the Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike (CC BY-NC-SA) conditions, or similar licenses. We would like others to use our data to remix, adapt or build based on their requirements, non-commercially as long as they are able to credit the team. It is also important for us to ensure that any new creations are licensed under the same terms. However, given we are new to this field, we would also be open to other licensing practices that allow us to do the same such as the provisions within Open Data Commons Open Database License.

Data sharing/openness

Given that most of our data is related to the social sciences, we are interested in uploading our data onto one of the following data repositories: Open Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research (Open ICPSR) or Open Science Framework (OSF). The reason for choosing both of these repositories is because of their history of storing specialised collections of data in various social science fields. Both of them are widely accessed and can provide the reach that we would like for the data to have. We are tending towards choosing OSF for two reasons that are important for us: one, that it supports the entire research life cycle and includes free and unlimited file storage, and two, it supports tools and services for the general population to access. However, we are willing to discuss other options if they are more suitable to the kind of data that we have.