

**ACTION RESEARCH STUDY ON
EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES FOR WOMEN**

Nirantar

B 64, Sarvodaya Enclave, New Delhi, Ph 69663334, Fax 6517726
e-mail: nirantar@vsnl.com

ACTION RESEARCH STUDY ON EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES FOR WOMEN

1.0 CONTEXT

Education is a concept that has been understood in very many ways. Nirantar defines education broadly as learning that enables women to take control over their lives. Education can be a medium through which women can access information, critically examine their situation, and participate in decision-making. Within these processes, literacy plays an important role in enabling women to express themselves and communicate within their immediate context as well as the larger world, with less dependence on those who have the word. Literacy also allows for women to enter into new roles in decentralized forums that they are part of.

Women, particularly those from marginalized sections, have been denied the right to education for far too long. The opportunity to acquire sustainable levels of literacy has been even more elusive. It therefore becomes critical to examine women's literacy as a governance issue – Which institutions, State and non-State, have the power to take decisions regarding allocation of resources (both human and financial), to make available educational opportunities for women? How do they perceive education and literacy, do they recognize these as rights that women from marginalized sections should have access to? What are their perceptions about the value of literacy? What are their priorities? How do women from marginalized sections view literacy? **How do the perceptions of the value of literacy on the part of institutions of governance and those of women from marginalized sections relate to one another? What are the implications if there is a disjuncture between the two?**

1.1 Women's Literacy and Governance

To have the opportunity to acquire literacy skills is a right, whether or not an effort is made to link it to larger educational processes towards empowerment. The importance of literacy in the first instance, lies in the measure of confidence that it accords adult learners. This is significant in a context in which society places a high premium on literacy. In the Indian context, there is typically an attitude of derision towards non-literate adults, their non-literate status being seen as indicative of ignorance and backwardness. For women from marginalized sections of society, illiteracy becomes yet another facet of their disempowerment.

Literacy interventions that are located in an empowerment paradigm can play a critical role in enabling women to understand their rights as citizens and to engage with institutions of governance in order that these rights are met. Literacy also plays a vital role in enabling women to participate more effectively from within decentralized State and non-State institutions of governance. Enhanced access to information helps women to deepen their understanding of issues of governance and to perform leadership roles within these institutions/forums. In our context, such opportunities are increasing with the greater thrust on decentralized structures of governance such as local self-governance bodies which now have one-third of the seats reserved for women, the Panchayati Raj Institutions and the various sub committees set up under the system- the Village Education and Social Justice Committees, community based organizations and forums. Women who are part of such forums would clearly benefit from literacy as they enter

these new arenas of public engagement, by enhancing their capacity to ensure that these structures are responsive to the interests of marginalized groups, including women.

1.2 Response of Institutions of Governance to Women's Literacy – The Indian Context

The State

Education policy in India is reputed to be among its most progressive policies with regard to the focus on gender. The National Policy on Education, in 1986 itself stated that 'education will be used as an agent of basic change in the status of women... The National Education System will play a positive, interventionist role in the empowerment of women.' This policy document, as others in the area of women's development such as the National Perspective plan for Women, the 5 year plan documents and the recently drafted National Policy for Women have been espousing the appropriate rhetoric and language in tune with the global trends and development. The government has also made commitments in various international fora such as the Jomtien Declaration for Education for All (1990), reiterated again in Dakar (2000); the CONFINTEA V (1997) and CEDAW (2000). However, there is a wide gap between such commitments and implementation.

Providing women access to education is clearly not a priority for the State. Further, as noted in the consideration of the report by the CEDAW committee, **the Indian Plans 'adopt a welfare approach to women whereas the need is for a 'rights-based approach'**. The story so far has been one of missed opportunities. This is particularly unfortunate in view of the claim of the Government of pursuing an empowerment approach to women.

A striking feature of the Total Literacy Campaigns (TLC) in India has been that, despite any special effort directed at women, the vast majority of adult learners were women. This clearly belies the myth that women do not place a value on literacy. It is well known that in the absence of opportunities to sustain and use literacy skills, the relapse into illiteracy is inevitable. At present, **little attention is being given to the urgent need to enable women to sustain or build upon the confidence and skills acquired**. Even parts of the country that had witnessed extremely successful literacy campaigns, now have precious little to show in the name of continuing education centres, with only stray visitors (mostly educated men) who occasionally come to read the newspaper.

Women's literacy is a key variable in the HDI (Human Development Index) and GDI (Gender Development Index) indices of measuring growth and development. India's GDI ratings are among the lower quartile, according to the UNDP report, primarily due to the low levels of female literacy. The distribution of resources within the education sector will only worsen this situation. It is skewed in a way that works against women from socio-economically weaker sections. Commitments to the goals of Education for All have an **almost exclusive focus on primary education**.

The lack of commitment to women's education is reflected in the budgetary allocations.

- The government is yet to fulfil its commitment to investing 6% of the GDP in education.
- The Adult education sector received only 2.5 % of the total allocations to the educational sector in the 9th plan period.
- Allocations of Rs.120 million for women's education were made in the ninth plan period. Less than 10% of these were actually utilized, while the balance was allowed to lapse. Under utilization indicates a lack of priority, yet it is used as an argument for further cutbacks.

The implied neglect of other age groups is likely to adversely affect the progress towards the

goals of EFA in India. This is particularly disturbing in the **context of globalization** with women and men needing new skills and abilities to survive development from a position of greater strength. This calls for an even greater demand for adult, non-formal education program. The international context also becomes important in that the focus on primary education reflects the **priorities of donor organizations**. In the last few years India has seen the inflow of large amounts of funding, most of it in the form of soft loans, in the primary education sector.

Apart from the Education Departments at the state and national levels, and the associated institutional framework (NIEPA, NCERT, NIAE, SLMAs etc) the governance of Education for women is also mandated within various programs for women's development and advancement in the department of Women and Child Development, Health and Labor. While the awareness inputs of such program interventions target women with inputs to communicate messages that aim at achieving sectoral goals the reference to women's literacy remains at best marginal.

The national discourse on development has been replete with terms such as convergence, decentralisation and community participation. The global discourse has also been one in which international donors and UN agencies have been 'encouraging' developing countries to alter their systems of governance in accordance with these principles. While their desirability is self-evident, we find ourselves in a situation in which the state uses **rhetoric around principles like community participation to cut back** on the efforts and resources that it needs to commit to adult education. (Could the government speak about the necessity of schools being supported by the community as it does of continuing education centres?) The resulting crisis of inertia and stagnation that has beset adult education has serious implications for women as learners.

Another euphemism commonly referred to in State policy is that of civil society participation. An expectation also reiterated by the donors and by means of international commitments upon the State is that of involvement of civil society. The real nature of involvement of civil society in planning and monitoring of government policy and program initiatives, is at best tokenism and is invariably in the form of insubstantial, one-time consultations. Briefings and de-briefings relating to international commitments have been known to be mere formalities required in the name of participatory consultation. The **absence of mechanisms that are democratic and transparent** clearly weighs against any efforts at impacting policies and program relating to women and education in a manner that makes them more responsive to the needs of learners.

Notwithstanding the successes of the high profile Mahila Samakhya programme, the only government programme in the name of women's education, the manner in which it has focussed on the empowerment agenda has precluded attention to women's literacy. Girls' education, on the other hand, is receiving an increasing share of the program's attention, despite the program stated mission of 'education for women's equality'.

1.3 NGOs and the Women's Movement

An area of concern has been the decline in both the extent and the quality of interventions in the area of women's literacy on the part of NGOs. In the hierarchy of priorities set by NGOs, awareness building, mobilization and 'economic empowerment' (largely equated with savings and credit groups) figure high on the list, with literacy either at the bottom or absent altogether. Even when interventions, especially those that seek to create decentralized forums, require reading and writing skills, be it for accessing information or managing financial resources, it is assumed that women will 'manage' without having literacy skills themselves. There are even situations when women's demands for literacy seem to be negated and fall by the wayside in the pursuit of more "worthy" goals of empowerment. Even when educational opportunities for women are on offer, there is inadequate attention to quality, sustainability and integration of

gender in critical areas such as pedagogy, curriculum, and the learning environment. The failure of most NGOs to engage seriously with women's literacy results in the lack of effective pressure on the State to be accountable on this front. The absence of a network to pursue this agenda limits further the focus on issues of women and education.

For the women's movement too, women's education and in particular literacy, are not significant, in contrast to issues of health, violence and legal rights. The linkages between education and women's empowerment are not part of the current discourse within the movement. Often it is women's traditional ways of knowing and communicating that are affirmed, an underlying fear being that literacy related work might actually widen the gap between the literate and non-literate. It is felt that poor women don't have the time for literacy, the burden of survival is too heavy. As with NGOs there is also a sense that women can gain access to information, can create and sustain systems to manage even collective efforts which appear to necessitate literacy – so why literacy? Literacy is in some ways perceived as a narrow, limited skill that is not needed for empowerment.

It is in this context that Nirantar felt the need to initiate an action research study that would evoke and analyze perceptions of women as well as those in institutions of governance related to education. The findings would seek to explore linkages between education and women's empowerment and to advocate for a greater prioritization of empowering educational opportunities for women from marginalized sections of society.

1.4 About Nirantar

Nirantar, a center for women and education, works towards making education an empowering and enabling process for women. We believe that education can be a decisive intervention towards women's equality. We understand education not as a one-time transfer of reading and writing skills, but as an on-going process informed by a vision of justice and equality. An education, which empowers, must create circumstances where women critically analyze their life situation and become active participants in the process of change by seeking alternatives, breaking stereotypes and demanding new information.

Nirantar's mandate is :

- 1 To establish the role of education in facilitating and sustaining processes of women's empowerment.
- 2 To impact the mainstream education system through integrating a gender perspective.
- 3 To explore feminist and critical pedagogy and share our learning with others working with women in the area of education

We believe that concerns central to the women's movement belong center stage in any agenda for women and girls' education. This includes issues of identity, violence, health, political representation and right to life and bodily integrity. Nirantar believes that structured teaching-learning spaces - both formal and non-formal - are vital arenas through which gender equality can be promoted. A large part of learning is access to information - and information is power. We believe literacy to be an important skill that women have a right to acquire and that literacy has a vital role to play in furthering process of empowerment.

We believe that for education to be empowering and to be meaningfully integrated into women's lives:

- Inputs relating to knowledge, skills, and understanding have to be sustained.
- Educational interventions must respect and work with women's existing knowledge base.
- Education must engage with issues of caste, class and gender.
- Education must help women critically analyze their life situations and make new choices.

In order to achieve these objectives our efforts involve:

- Innovations at the field level which create a body of knowledge and demonstrate possibilities of education for empowerment.
- Creation and dissemination of gender sensitive materials.
- Lobbying with the State for changes in policies and program relating to gender and education.
- Research and documentation to highlight and analyze the linkages between education and women's empowerment.
- Capacity building of those working with women in the realm of education in order that they can use education as a meaningful tool for empowerment.

1.5 Why is Nirantar taking up this issue?

During the course of our work we have become increasingly aware of the marginalization of literacy for women an area of concern. Our observations and experiences in the field, interactions with NGOs and women's groups, academics, policy-makers as well as other educationists - have contributed to a degree of understanding about why this marginalization is taking place. This understanding needs to be deepened, impressions, which need to be tested - in order to enter into advocacy with the major players in the realm of women's literacy. We feel the need to engage with the assumptions and prioritizations of institutions of governance that determine women's access to literacy. Nirantar seeks to enter into advocacy in collaboration with the various players, some of whom we are already interacting with in the course of our work.

2.0 RESEARCH MODEL

The goal is to establish women's education with focus on literacy as an area of concern not only on the part of the State but also civil society organizations.

There were substantial changes in the objectives, strategies and activities. Presented below is a summary of the original plan, the reasons for the shift, followed by the reformulated plan.

2.1 The initial plan...

The study initially planned by Nirantar sought to understand and analyze the nature and opportunities for education for women and girls from socio-economically vulnerable/marginalised sections. Within this it aimed at examining curricula, training and other aspects of literacy interventions for women including issues of motivation and sustainability. The institutional players that it sought to understand included the State, NGOs and women's organizations agendas. The study sought to relate the perceptions of these players on women's education to the relevance that women perceived of education in their lives.

As it was initially conceived, the Nirantar team was meant to undertake case studies of NGOs that have made successful interventions in the area of women's education, with a view to demonstrating possibilities as well as constraints. The study was also to include a macro analysis

of the trends in policy related to the priority and space accorded to women's education. This second objective was to be met through a literature review as well as by undertaking an intensive regional analysis of educational opportunities in a district of a state in North India, and the response of women and girl's to these opportunities. We planned, in the analysis, to link the opportunities to the perspectives towards gender and education of the NGOs, women's groups, bureaucrats and other personnel in the education sector in the district.

2.2 Why the change in strategy?

After the formulation of the research design and a field visit to one of the organizations we planned to profile, there began a process of introspection within the organization, triggered off by dialogue with individuals and other partner organizations linked with the GCG program. The strategy for the study underwent a significant change since we saw the merits of working towards the objectives of the study through a collective process of understanding and analysis. It was felt that it would be much more meaningful to involve NGOs themselves in the process of research to critically examine existing interventions in the area of women's education and their linkages with empowerment. The hope was that insights gained would be richer and the process would help create a forum which would enable mutual learning as well as more effective advocacy, in a context in which there is no existing forum which is advocating for women's education. This shift in strategy also meant that it was not possible to meet all the objectives of the earlier plan. It was decided therefore to shelve the objective of analyzing educational interventions in one particular district in the country. Since this would have looked at interventions aimed at both girls and women, dropping this part of the plan meant that the focus would be exclusively on women.

Another factor which helped us take the decision to change the strategy in a fundamental way, although not so clearly articulated, was that it was not as though the study was of the nature of highlighting best practices alone. The situation vis-à-vis women's literacy was such that the study was bound to unearth experiences which would reflect the challenges, particularly in terms of sustaining literacy and linking it to continuing education. It was questionable how much it would help if Nirantar conducted case-studies on its own. Would it not be much better if the process allowed organizations to build capacities in a way that would strengthen their work in the long run. A partnership model also provided much more scope to interact with the organizations in order to engage with them on issues of women's literacy.

2.3 The reformulated plan

Objectives

- 1 To analyze and understand educational opportunities for women from socio- economically marginalised sections in the context of the agendas of the State, NGO and women's organizations.
- 2 To examine and highlight the linkages between education and women's empowerment, in particular the role that education plays in enabling women to play a more effective role in decision making in various forums that they are part of, such as Panchayati raj institutions and self-help groups.
- 2 To advocate for an expansion of empowering, quality educational opportunities for women with the government as well as NGOs and women's organizations.

2.4 Assumptions

In our understanding, this study was distinct from conventional research or evaluation, since it did not intend to examine the issue of access and participation through a simple juxta-positioning of supply and demand elements of women's literacy and education. On the demand side we already know about constraining factors such as the patriarchal biases at work in the socio-

cultural environment and the burden of work on women from lower income households. We realized that the examination of literacy in the context of women's empowerment would need to take into consideration the complex factors that influence women's lives and determine their choices. For one, there is much that is in the realm of the potential and hence lies beyond the scope of the present system, indicating the demand potential. Whether educational opportunities are available for women and what their nature is depends on a number of factors which do not fall within the supply or demand categories. The study therefore sought to evoke and understand perceptions and priorities of the State, NGOs, women's groups regarding the need, content and approach to education. These are all factors that need to be considered in a holistic analysis of education in a gender perspective. In a situation where much needs to be done for increasing awareness about the possibilities inherent in the area of gender and education, visualizing and articulating 'what should be' also assumes great importance.

Another assumption with which we worked is that women's education is a particularly challenging area. Our effort was to understand strengths, constraints as well as possibilities inherent in the educational interventions being studied. We steered clear therefore of seeking to highlight and to showcase an 'ideal' towards creating models.

2.5 Strategies

The action-research project has two main elements:

1. Engaging with State Policies Relating To Gender and Education

- An analysis of trends in policy documents and existing literature on educational opportunities for women, and on the perspective and content of educational program of the government of India to understand the perspective of policy makers and bureaucrats towards women's education. Examination of the donor agenda and international funding priorities, perspectives and approaches adopted for women's education.
- To analyze the provisions and priorities of education and within the sector in the context of the provisions of the CEDAW declaration and the EFA commitments made at Dakar, as key areas for a gender audit strategy for the education sector.
- Discussions with the key representatives of departments and decision makers of these programs, at the centre and with donor community to gain insights into their perspectives.
- Consultations organized in collaboration with networks and organizations, to highlight the concerns and to facilitate the emergence of lobbies to influence and address issues relating to women's education

2 Study Tours of Educational Programs for women

Through a participatory action research process in partnership with a few selected NGOs and Total Literacy Campaign districts, an analysis of initiatives in the realm of women's education will be undertaken to highlight the opportunities and strategies for creation of spaces for women's education. Highlighting significant experiences that offer greater opportunities for women would be a significant component of the advocacy strategy. The organizations would be included in the study to represent a range of sectoral priorities to and various perspectives. The following aspects will be covered in the case-studies –

The policy framework: the emergence of education within the agenda of the organization; the importance given to women's education in the organization's overall work; the perspective that informs the education program;

The Institutional framework within the education programme, the management processes systems and the incorporation of gender and class issues therein;

The nature of the education programme content – Issues of pedagogy will be engaged with to understand the linkages being made between literacy and practical or strategic needs of women.

Gender In Training and curricula : We would seek to understand how gender is dealt with in the trainings of those involved in adult education – be they volunteers and trainers linked to literacy campaigns or workers of NGOs which are running literacy centers. What is the nature and content of gender in the existing curricula- do these changes go beyond tokenism?

The Recipients

Perceptions regarding quality and relevance of the educational interventions will be sought. What were the motivations – were these based on concrete needs and aspirations? Are there any visible linkages between the educational intervention and empowerment? What impact has the programme had on the lives of women who have participated in it? If there have been drop-outs what are the underlying reasons?

As mentioned earlier a participatory action research process would be adopted with a few selected groups. The selection of organisations would be based on criteria of gender perspective, primacy of education, strategic positioning and basis of the educational intervention etc. The underlying principle would be that of willingness to enter into a collective learning and sharing process, as well as learnings through each other's innovations. The case studies will entail looking at existing reports and reviews, observing field-level interventions, interviews and discussions with members of the organization as well as the community. The activities will entail –

- Identification of and preliminary discussions with partner organizations
- Identified workers of participating organizations would then participate in a preparatory workshop which would involve perspective building around issues in women's education, macro trends in policy relating to gender and education, and the politics of gender. They would also be exposed to methodologies in participatory research. Thereafter, participants would plan for the issues to be inquired into and the methodology to be adopted for the analysis of organizations' projects.

Each partner organization, facilitated by the Nirantar team, would then undertake a study of another partner's initiatives through exchanges. During their visit, interactions would be held with various stakeholders from the community as well the organization including -

- Heads of organizations and units
- Head of women's education unit and its staff
- Field workers of women's education program
- Women who participated in the education programme
- Women who dropped out
- Women who had exposure to structured learning processes
- Women who did not opt for the literacy programme
- Members of learners' families and representatives of the community

Methods used during these interactions involved -

- Focus Group discussions
- Group Interviews
- Individual Interviews

Each team would be required to document and present an analysis of their respective studies and share the same with the other participants of the collective action research programme. This

would be done at a workshop where the conclusions of the study would be shared and related to the macro trends and perspectives. Finally conclusions and lessons would be drawn and strategies to address the emerging concerns would be defined.

Sharing of findings, and highlighting of innovations and successful strategies will be undertaken in various forums.

It is hoped that a forum will emerge that will provide the space for an ongoing dialogue and articulation of the concerns at various levels -with the state, NGOs and women's groups. This forum could undertake monitoring of state policies and commitments using frameworks such as CEDAW and Education for All. An initiative would have been made to reduce the marginalization of the issue of women's education.

3 ANALYSIS OF WHAT WAS DONE.

3.1 Literature Review

A significant part of the study was the literature review of Government policies and programmes in the education sector, with a focus on women's education. Much of what emerged from this literature review is reflected in sections 1.2 - Response of Institutions of Governance to Women's Literacy, The Indian Context as well as section 1.3 – NGOs and the Women's Movement. The literature review also enabled us to gain a historical understanding of issues relating to gender and education in the Indian context. Some of these learnings can be found in Annexure 1.

3.2 Networking and Lobbying to Strengthen the Focus on Women's Education

Nirantar undertook the following activities in pursuance of the objective of advocacy on gender and education related issues.

1 National Consultation on Gender and Education Policy

Having initiated work on the action research study, Nirantar was more proactive in seeking opportunities for advocacy. Therefore at an Asian regional meeting organized by ASPBAE (Asia and South Pacific Bureau of Adult Education) and World Education, Nirantar offered to co-ordinate a national convention that would bring together concerns relating to recent government policies on education. This led to the National Consultation on Gender and Education Policy, which was planned and organized in collaboration with ASPBAE (Asia and South Pacific Bureau of Adult Education), one of the few regional networks who are actively involved in advocacy work in the area of adult education as well as being concerned about gender issues within education.

Decisions regarding the scope, scale, participants, resource persons and timing of the Consultation were taken in a strategic way, informed by our advocacy agenda. While Nirantar's advocacy agenda as defined in the action research study, has focussed on issues relating to women's education, it was felt that the Consultation should consider issues more holistically. Focussing only on women's education ran a danger of alienating potential allies. It was not mere 'strategy' to position our advocacy as 'gender and education' as opposed to 'women and education' since we do consider gender issues relating to elementary education to be important, and in fact work on some of these issues.

The timing of the Consultation was important because the 10th Five Year Plan was being

formulated. It was also the time when efforts were afoot to subsume the Mahila Samakhya programme (MS, mentioned in Section I, is the only large-scale women focussed programme of the education department) within the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) a new convergent scheme for elementary education. If this were to happen the fears were that the little focus made possible on women's education for empowerment through this one window would be lost. MS would be reduced to the role of mobilizers and monitors for children's education.

Critical steps were taken in preparation for the Consultation to evolve our own clarity and to ensure the involvement of the State. One important element of this process of educating ourselves was understanding the stages entailed in formulating the 10th five year plan. A background note for the workshop, highlighting the key concerns, was used to elicit interest and appreciation for the issues with a wide range of individuals and organizations.

Meetings with critical persons in the Department of Education, the Mahila Samakhya programme and the Planning Commission were held to invite them to the Consultation. With these meetings our advocacy had already begun. The meetings entailed discussions around what we considered important issues of advocacy. We also personally met key resource persons, several of whom were individuals who are highly respected in their field and fairly high profile.

The Consultation had a number of significant outcomes:

- i. To our surprise, there were many more people interested and concerned about the issue than we had expected, certainly more than we could accommodate in the Consultation. After a long time, the Consultation had provided an opportunity for individuals and organizations to come together on this common concern. (A list of participants is given in annexure 2).
- ii. Since a number of representatives of the State participated (including the Advisor education, Planning Commission to whom the recommendations were presented), the Consultation provided an opportunity to influence opinions on key concerns.
- iii. Presentations on a varied range of issues provided a review that enabled participants to articulate needs and priorities for the future and to form a coordinating committee to follow through on the recommendations. This committee met a few times to finalize the recommendations of the Consultation. The effort was made to sharpen recommendations in order that they were more effective in lobbying since generalized recommendations we realized would give policy makers much more leeway to claim that they were responding to demands being made.
- iv. The recommendations were presented to the relevant policy makers. This included some members of the working group that were involved in drafting the plan document for the Department of Education. (A summary of the recommendations is provided in annexure 3).
- v. A direct outcome of these efforts is a commitment from the government to maintain the district identity and mandate of the Mahila Samakhya programme, and not merge it with the SSA at least for the duration of the 10th Five Year Plan. The National Project Director of MS expressed her appreciation of our efforts and the impact that they made.

2 Nirantar's Advocacy Efforts after the Consultation

Since the Consultation, the larger Nirantar team has undertaken several initiatives to impact governance and institutions of governance on issues related to gender and education.

Some of these efforts have been:

National level workshop on Continuing Education :

One of the recommendations of the National Consultation on Gender and Education that was presented to the National Literacy Mission was the need for capacity building of those implementing Continuing Education program. In response it was proposed that Nirantar should organize a National workshop on Innovations in Continuing Education in collaboration with the Directorate of Adult Education. We saw this as an opportunity to work in a constructive, tangible way with the State. Within Nirantar the workshop was planned and co-ordinated by the health education team. The workshop was also an opportunity to discuss the larger context in which the programme is being implemented in particular local self-governance. An attempt was made to keep the discussions informed by a gender just perspective. An outcome of the workshop was a set of recommendations that can be used for further advocacy.

The workshop was significant in terms of building a working relationship with important players within the State who can impact policy (the introductory and concluding sessions were attended by the Director General of the National Literacy Mission). And yet the response on the part of the district leadership in charge of the CE program was extremely uninspired. There was virtually no effort on their part to involve any of the several resource persons from NGOs who had been invited to the workshop. We are at present at a loss as to how to take the process forward. **It seems that limited inputs aimed at impacting large-scale government program are like a drop in the ocean. Such an input can only be effective if it is part of a larger strategy,** such as one of facilitating more intensive interactions between NGOs and CE program at the local level.

Studying the impact of the Padhna Badhna Andolan in Chattisgarh:

Padhna Badhna Andolan (PBA) was a much acclaimed, high profile adult literacy programme of the Madhya Pradesh Government. The programme has ostensibly improved on the literacy campaign model. It worked on the assumption that there already exists a demand in the community and that all that is required is a response in term of identifying a local person who will be paid on a per learner basis. After providing minimal training inputs, the monitoring can be left to workers of other departments. Nirantar wanted to examine the underlying principles and assumptions underlying PBA since they have great significance in the current education policy discourse. These included community participation in adult education and that of the concept of convergence, implying minimalist intervention (in term of infrastructure and full time staff). In order to examine the claims made by articulate representatives of the programme and slick documents, a short term collaborative study initiated by Nirantar, the National Literacy Resource Center and the Department of Adult Education, Raipur University and Nirantar.

The study revealed that the field level realities were sharply at variance from the claims. The results of the literacy test that we conducted with a sample of learners showed that very few of them could be considered neo-literate. It became clear that it was the intense desire to see results on the part of the State leadership that was driving employees of various departments to frantically monitor the programme in its last stage. However, in the absence of adequate human and financial resources, the training and follow up was grossly inadequate. PBA was yet another illustration of the government's lack of seriousness about providing real, sustainable educational opportunities to learners. There were also no linkages with women's empowerment being pursued by the programme. Community participation meant that community leaders felt highly pressurized to ensure that action was not taken against primary school teachers in the village who were monitoring the programme under duress. Although the study was limited in scope and quality of the data generated mediocre, because of problems in co-ordination at the local level, it has provided insights that we are planning to publish in the form of an article.

Understanding the present status of rural libraries:

Nirantar undertook a collaborative study with Bharat Gyan Vigyan Samiti to understand the present status of rural libraries. In examining issues of access we found that the primary users of libraries were educated men or school going children. The system of acquiring reading material was not decentralized and therefore not responsive to the needs of readers. The study revealed interesting biases in terms of assumptions that librarians made about the way in which reading preferences were gendered. The findings of the study were published as part of the larger UNESCO sponsored study on post literacy undertaken by the Bharat Gyan Vigyan Samiti.

There were several important learning from these experiences of quick, short term collaborative research studies. In particular we realized the implications of inadequate opportunity to orient those who will be gathering field level data.

Curriculum, Gender and Education

The National Council of Education, Research and Training is the State sponsored apex body for provision of inputs to the formal school system. The NCERT published the National Curriculum Framework (NCF) that could inform the school system throughout the country. The NCF generated great concern amongst educationists and activists because it clearly puts forward the ideology of the right wing Hindu fundamentalists. While participating in discussions and activism around the NCF, Nirantar found that the very serious implications on gender were not being raised. As with other aspects of education, there was also an absence of engagement with NCF on the part of women's groups. We have therefore been participating in various forums to bring this dimension into the ongoing debate. For instance, at a recent Human Rights Conference, which was attempting to map various rights issues, Nirantar was proactive in creating space for education as a right. The gender implication of the NCF was one of the important concerns that we raised in the forum. We have also raised this issue in trainings with government school teachers and principals. We plan to take this issue forward by involving women's groups in a larger process of undertaking a gender audit of teaching learning materials.

Monitoring Policy Commitments

Nirantar has been working on how it can engage with monitoring the government's international commitments with regard to Education for All (EFA). Efforts to gather information on the steps taken by the government to set up the required civil society monitoring committee has not yielded any results. Nirantar in collaboration with ASPBAE is exploring the possibility of networking around EFA.

3.3 The Action Research Study

As mentioned earlier, the Action Research Study sought to analyze the approaches towards education on the part of organizations involved in educational interventions for women, and to capture women's own perceptions about education/literacy and empowerment. The study was undertaken in partnership with 6 other organizations through a process of exchange study tours.

The process proved to be rich learning experience for all the organizations involved in the study. The process of preparing for the study itself exposed participants to a wide range of concerns. Conceptual issues of empowerment were examined, inputs provided on the history of women's education as well as current policy level concerns. Discussions provided opportunities for reflection and capacity enhancement among participants.

Decisions around who would visit which organization was an open-ended process in most cases, in order to provide space for maximum learning. Through the exchange study tours, each organization was able to understand and analyze the other organization's work. This process

pushed both the visiting and the host organizations to examine their own approaches and activities. The discussions with the leadership of the host organization also served to highlight aspects related to women's literacy that the organization may have lost sight of or ignored. State policies on education and the space for women's education would also be discussed, along with approaches to integrate literacy inputs into ongoing work of the organizations. Women's desire for literacy and the confidence and aspirations that it represents presented a challenge to organization leaders, and compelled them to reflect and examine their responses to it.

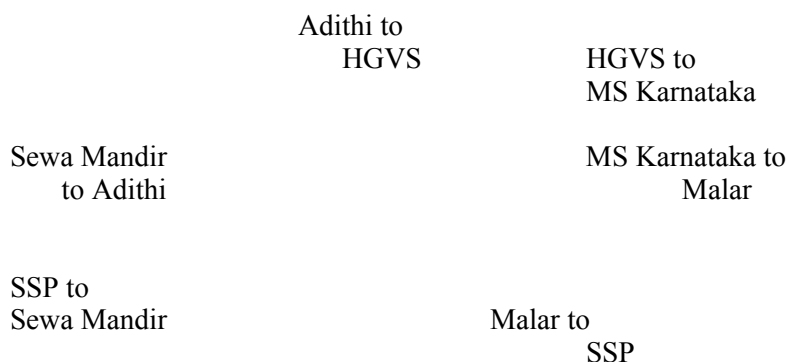
To this extent the ARS process itself had an advocacy content but it would be too early and preemptive to comment on the impact of these processes. Suffice it to say that they have contributed to building an environment that is willing to consider women's needs and aspirations for literacy and education within their gamut of activities.

The findings and conclusions are to be shared during visits to each of the partner organizations. This stage will be significant in the process of advocacy with the organizations for a higher prioritization of quality literacy work with women.

The ARS involved the following steps towards specific outcomes:

Action	Outcome
1. Selection and contact with prospective organizations based on criteria	Organizations with relevant experience committed resources and staff to the process.
2. Preparatory workshop to evolve design of study and plan process of study	Participants exposed to conceptual nuances of women's empowerment and education.
3. Exchange tours between organizations for field work.	Collectively evolve the questionnaire and methodology, enhancing understanding and commitment to process.
4. Analysis of field visits (to be shared with field partners) written by Nirantar.	Reflection, analysis and learning on women's education and empowerment, comparisons to perspectives and experiences in own organization. Conclusions on women's and organizational perspectives on women's education and empowerment

AR Process



Nirantar team members were part of each visit and have taken the main responsibility to prepare the reports. The time in the field together however did provide adequate opportunity to share conclusions and initial analysis. A number of members of partner organizations who undertook the tours were also not comfortable with report preparations and it fell upon Nirantar to undertake this task. Also compulsions of time lines and resources did not permit us the luxury of spending

The learnings from the Action Research Study are presented in four smaller sections.

- The first section shares what women have articulated about the value that they see in literacy.
- The second briefly describes the range of perspectives and initiatives that the partner organizations represent.
- The third looks at the linkages, both existing and potential between governance and literacy in the context of what has emerged from the study
- The fourth section analyses constraining factors, simultaneously indicating what conditions are required for an effective governance of literacy programmes for women.

3.3.1.1 WOMEN'S PERCEPTIONS OF LITERACY

In all our interactions with women of communities that partner organizations were working with, we heard unequivocal expressions of the value that they saw in literacy. Even women who had not been part of literacy interventions spoke about the role of literacy in enhancing self-esteem. Some women spoke about 'being happy' to be literate, a feeling of well being for too long denied. Women everywhere - educated and non-literate - spoke of how literacy gave confidence, allowed literate women to speak without fear. "I no longer have to feel ashamed of having to ask strangers about bus numbers. I can come and go myself." Everywhere women stated that literacy had meant for them an increase in mobility. Clearly the value of literacy in the context of mobility is seen in women not being dependent on the educated. The mobility gained was of moving independently to greater distances, as well as socio-economic mobility to enter new spheres of work and new roles in public spheres.

Women weavers in a group in Kiliyoor, Kanyakumari district (Malar) stated that literacy skills enabled them to sign on the register when they were paid their wages. They said they could read the amounts noted by the contractors. When asked about the extent to which they actually read what was written on the documents they signed, they expressed the view that the fact of their being able to read was more significant since traders were wary of cheating women whom they identified as literate. Clearly what mattered was not so much the functional value of literacy as the perceived value of literacy, both on the part of the traders and the women, which contributed to the women feeling more confident.

Even if women can't read or write after going through a literacy programme, they say and feel they can, indicating a confidence that stems from this perceived value of literacy. This was further seemed in what virtually all the women we spoke with said about literacy preventing them from being duped. 'The shopkeeper could no longer get away with under weighing what he sells or selling it for a higher price.' Responses such as these need to be located in a context in which those who do dupe and exploit are the literate class. Acquiring literacy skills is somehow seen as reducing the difference in power and therefore the vulnerability experienced.

For women who have had literacy opportunities, the SLP processes have provided a space. The MahaSangha women clearly highlighted this when they said that the difference between the education they got in school and in their involvement with SSP was that one was within four walls while the other encouraged them to move out into the world. One failed to remove their fears, while the other broke their fears of men, the police and government servants.

Literacy's relationship with power was clear when women spoke of the shame of being *angootha chaap*, a derogatory term for those who use thumb impressions, instead of signing their name. Underlying this was the fear of being derided because of not being literate. The acquisition of literacy skills clearly implied a shift in power relations, of moving into the world of the literate.

Another dimension of power was expressed in the reduced sense of dependency that women

experienced. At times the feeling of dependence when the women were non-literate was felt in an emotionally intense way. *When Mani bai, a community level worker with Sewa Mandir, Udaipur, had to fill in the reporting register, she turned to her literate colleague for help. When she responded by saying that she was 'too busy', Mani bai was reduced to tears. She said that she would not have had to depend on anyone if she had been educated herself.*

Women in Gobbur B, Bidar district, Karnataka(Mahila Samakhya) went to the police station in the block after their training programme, to make contact and to understand how the systems functioned. In the course of their discussions there the thana SHO handed them a paper. The women were totally nonplussed at not being able to read the document and came out of the Thana in tears of frustration and determined to read.

There were also more normative values associated with literacy as a means of taking better care of home and children, of being better informed about hygiene and cleanliness. There were also responses that equated illiteracy with the lack of capacity to understand and discern issues (*bura-bhala*). Some qualified this statement. In their view, "All women are intelligent and wise. However a literate woman thinks before she speaks, while an illiterate woman says whatever comes to mind."

A greater sense of a world-view, ability to access information, have knowledge about the functioning of the legal system and ability to negotiate were other perceptions relating to literacy.

Perceptions on the part of the family and the community were also reported to have changed. ***"I can hold my face high and check my children's work because they respect me more."***

Women's aspirations were also reflected in their perceptions of literacy - "I could do different work if I were literate. "My husband would have listened to me". ***"I could think about a future that is different from my present struggles as a laborer in the literacy classes"***

The importance that women place on literacy is manifested in their willingness to take on heavy odds to participate in literacy programmes. Opposition from the family as well as the community has needed to be overcome for them to be able to come to literacy centres.

Mamla is a member of one of the REFLECT circles facilitated by Adithi. Mamla's husband does not live in the village. When Mamla expressed an interest in participating in the circle, her brother-in-law was against it. He even resorted to violence. Her mother-in-law was also against her going to the center. Other women from the circle went and talked to both of them but ultimately Mamla managed to start attending the circle because of her husband's support. Women have used different negotiating strategies. Sometimes other women members of the family have played a supportive role. Take the case of Shyama and her sister in law Savita. When Savita's husband stopped her from attending the center, Shyama tried to convince him, using her own example and that of Kamini, her other sister in law. Finally Savita began attending the circle when her husband left town. But the three women firmly believe that they will be able to convince Savita's husband once he returns.

There has also been opposition from male members of the community. People have instigated male family members - "She doesn't observe purdah anymore. She has become wayward (bigad gayee)." Religion is another important reason used to prevent women from attending. Some men in Munshi ka Tola were categorical that the activities of the circle were anti-Islamic. According to the Maulvi only those women go to the center whose husband's have no control (vash) over them.

From all that women said during the course of the study, it was clear that their perceptions of the value of literacy go well beyond its functional value as a skill, to encompass their sense of self-

worth, status in the family, as workers, as informed citizens. Literacy implies for them a shift in their levels of dependence towards autonomy and self-reliance. Women have clearly expressed the criticality of literacy as a means to empowerment.

3.3.1.2 THE PARTNER ORGANIZATIONS – A Spectrum

The study sought to examine to what extent and how organizations are taking cognizance of the value women accord to literacy.

The partner organizations represent a wide range of perspectives and priorities in their work towards empowerment and equitable governance. In terms of gender, some organizations have a clearly articulated feminist position that informs their interventions in a range of manifestations of patriarchy. There are other organizations that have a more liberal feminist perspective, who seek to bring women into the public domain but also work within a certain limit in terms of which women's issues they want to pull into the public domain. Domestic violence was often one such issue. There are also organizations that find themselves working with women, primarily because of women's enthusiastic response to their interventions. These organizations now seek to develop their gender perspective much more.

It is striking that an important agenda of virtually all the partner organizations is to facilitate women's participation in local institutions of governance. These institutions include Panchayats (units of local self- governance) in which one-third seats are reserved for women. The other type of institutions are the community based institutions that the partner organizations have facilitated. Their creation is inspired by a vision of ownership of institutions of governance by the communities themselves. With most of these forums being women's forums there is desire to ensure that women enter the public realm and to impact the larger reality in which they operate. These efforts on the part of NGOs is a heartening development. It reflects a growing commitment on the part of NGOs to create conditions that enable women to participate in and impact processes of governance.

Mahila Samakhya Karnataka – a women's empowerment programme sponsored by the government and Swayam Shikshan Prayog – a network of grassroots women's groups in Maharashtra – are both working towards strengthening the role that women play in Panchayats. This is being done through inputs to elected women members as well as by strengthening the role that women from village-level groups can play in supporting the women who have been elected as well as in making the functioning of the Panchayats more accountable. Both organizations are also providing opportunities to strengthen savings and credit groups by facilitating the creation of federations. Organizations like Seva Mandir, in addition to providing functional literacy inputs to para-workers and women from communities they work with, have initiated Village Development Committees with both women and men as members, which are meant to generate and manage their own resources for development of the village. Adithi, an organization with a strong feminist perspective, has been using REFLECT, a methodology which seeks to closely integrate literacy and empowerment agendas, is now striving to constitute Gram Vikas Samitis that will coordinate all the Adithi programmes in that village. Malar, a women's organization that emerged from the Total Literacy Campaign in Kanyakumari, and Zila Saksharta Samiti, Mandi, have both initiated savings and credit groups and view this as a means for attainment of organizational self reliance and sustainability.

The Action Research Study indicates that there are significant linkages between literacy and the various processes of empowerment and governance that are underway. Some efforts are being made to make these linkages. There are numerous other possibilities that are in the realm of the

potential.

3.3.2 Literacy and Governance linkages

In the context of governance, we look at what has emerged in terms of women's abilities to act as empowered citizens and as members of institutions of governance.

3.3.2.1 Claiming Citizenship Rights

As stated above literacy has enabled women to feel more confident and self assured in their dealings with others. This confidence at the individual level has been greatly strengthened by the collectives that women are part of. Often these collectives have taken up a number of issues that relate to women's rights as well as access to resources such as government schemes.

In the case of Adithi, literacy has played a critical role in the creation of such forums. The REFLECT approach adopted by the organization entails women members of the REFLECT circle meeting every day. At the stage of basic literacy, when women meet the agenda is literacy and around its content – discussion and action. The organization also facilitates savings groups in the same villages but social action is initiated primarily by members of the REFLECT circles. The fact of their meeting everyday and the opportunity to have access to information and discussions appears to explain this.

3.3.2.2 Participation in Panchayats

Literacy impacts not only women's self-image but also the community's perceptions of them. This has enabled many women to stand for Panchayat elections, taking advantage of the opportunity provided by the reservation of seats for women.

Elected women in Karnataka(MS-K) have sought literacy inputs to enhance their capacities to deal with their role as people's representatives more effectively. It has also been reported that neo-literate women have experienced a greater sense of confidence in their dealing with other members of the Panchayat and with other government structures that they have to interact with. In several of the organizations there have been well planned structured learning processes in place for women to be able to function more effectively as Panchayat members. None of the organizations however have offered literacy opportunities for women who have been elected women representatives of Panchayats. This is an area that has tremendous potential. For example, the information that is being provided to elected members by the partner organizations could also be given in a form that is simply written. Fragile literacy skills are not enough to enable women to be able to read the inaccessible language and style in which government circulars and other material are written. While MS Karnataka has encouraged women to find alternative means to address the lack/dearth of their own literacy, by taking their children or other literate members assistance etc, the creation of literacy skills in the women themselves is an agenda which could well be addressed. This in itself is a source of great concern. On the other hand, while the government expresses a commitment to enable women to enter into local self-governance, its information and communication material seems almost designed to exclude those who do not have sufficiently high levels of education, i.e. those who do not belong to the more powerful sections of society.

3.3.2.3 Participation In Community Based Institutions Of Governance

As with women in Panchayats, structured learning inputs are being provided to women who are members of the new, emerging community based forums and institutions being facilitated by the partner organizations. Organizations are well aware of the criticality of capacity building for genuine decentralization.

Organizations like the Swayam Shikshan Prayog provide striking examples of how women-centred ways of learning can be drawn upon for capacity building. Systematic planning goes into creating spaces for co-operative learning based on the experiences and knowledge of women who are members of these forums. There is a constant process of widening the scope of this knowledge. Well-planned exposure visits are an extremely effective way in which this is done. The organization plays a strategic facilitative role, while the process is rooted in lateral learning. As a consequence women are themselves able to take on the roles of teachers to other newer groups through their own processes of sharing.

Participation in community based forums entails women coming into a variety of new and challenging roles. Women need to perform these roles in a manner that the institution of governance gains a stature and credibility both within the community as well as vis-a-vis the mainstream. As members of these organizations, they need to enter into institutional decision-making, co-ordination, management, negotiating with mainstream structures of power, accessing new information and many other roles. As institutions of governance there are financial resources to be managed. This challenge becomes even greater at the level of Federations of savings groups. In this context it is not surprising that in virtually all such institutions in the Action Research Study, the leadership is in the hands of literate women. All these are women who have had the opportunity to get school education earlier in their lives. Many of them are from better off families.

In the savings groups initiated by ZSS, Mandi, the President could be non-literate if she had good leadership skills, but the Secretaries, the more powerful of the two positions, all had school education.

In the case of SSP, all the members of the Nilanga savings and credit groups Federation had school education. One of the members has studied upto the fourth standard, the rest were even more educated. This is true of the leadership in all various forums that have emerged. The leadership is of a truly impressive standard, the women are extremely energized and on a continuous, learning track that SSP as an organization is hard pressed to sustain, in providing the necessary support. With the Mahila Mahiti Kendras that are now being set up as information hubs, the women are very keen on learning computers which, among other things, will enable them to monitor government schemes in their area more effectively.

In each village one can see a group of five to six women who have emerged as strong leaders, who are performing critical tasks such as audits of different groups in the area and conducting market surveys. These women are being recognized in their areas as leaders, not just as wives of their husbands. The way in which grass roots leadership has emerged has drawn large numbers of women into the public arena as players to be reckoned with. As leaders these women will get more and more opportunities to grow. And these are women, who other than having leadership skills, all have some level of education. In this context, literacy inputs to other women would be part of a strategy to prevent the gap from becoming 'too wide', for the women to be able to ensure an accountable and transparent way of functioning. If SSP were to initiate doing literacy work, over time it could help neo-literate women build on their skills to undertake more and more work that requires literacy skills.

The driving force behind such institutions is a desire to promote equitable, democratic principles of development. It becomes vital therefore that institutions which seek to redress power inequalities, and NGOs that are supporting them, are aware a reality of the power dynamics that might ensue between an educated leadership and other members of the forum. The provision of literacy opportunities to member of the forums then becomes an agenda, which urgently needs to be addressed. The vision behind community based forums is also that its members will have reduced dependency and a greater degree of control over their situation. This has synergy with a

literacy agenda which seeks to reduce the dependency of the non-literate on those who have the word.

Sewa Mandir is conscious of this reality operating in the Village Development Committees that it is promoting. Here they find that the disadvantages stemming from being non-literate are compounded by gender inequalities. Participation of women in these committees is hampered by both. Sewa Mandir is at present trying to address this situation both by specific training directed at women members of these committees and by the provision of literacy inputs to non-literate committee members, both women and men.

Sewa Mandir is also in the process of providing literacy inputs to a section of women members of savings groups. It is felt that this would help women to demand a greater accountability from the leaders of the groups. This would enhance the transparency in the functioning of the groups.

Literacy clearly has a role to play in ensuring that institutions of governance, be they Panchayats or community based forums, function on principles of democracy, transparency and accountability. And yet while some efforts are being made to provide literacy opportunities to women, there is a long way to go. In some situations structured learning inputs are provided but not literacy. Where literacy inputs are being provided resources and capacity building are major challenges. The biggest challenge of all lies in how to sustain literacy skills in a manner that link meaningfully to the contexts of women's lives. We examine some of these issues below.

3.3.3 Factors that need to be addressed for effective Governance of literacy programmes

Perception of the value of literacy within organizations

At times literacy and empowering/structured learning processes are perceived in an 'either' 'or' manner. This manifests itself in views like "When there is no empowerment of women there is no education. Understanding (*samajh*) is the critical ingredient for education. In the literacy campaign women learnt to read and write, with no change in their status." It is true that literacy without a larger context of empowerment will not be explored to its fullest potential. However it is also true that the combination of structured learning processes and literacy would take the process of empowerment much further. To this one might add that there should not be a need for a 'justification' in terms of literacy furthering empowerment. A rights perspective would state that access to literacy is a resource that women have been denied and that denial needs to be redressed. In none of the interaction with members of organizations did we encounter a rights perspective vis-à-vis education.

Competing priorities within the organization

Organizations that are involved in literacy work have expressed an inability to give adequate attention to literacy because of other pressing priorities. In some cases the competing needs have had to do with community level institutional building. Within the realm of education it is often the case that greater resources are invested in children's education than on women's education. It is interesting that the work of Village Education Committees which most organizations have established, focus exclusively on children's education. Women in these committees who offer their time and energy monitor the functioning of schools but do not address the educational needs of women or other adults in the village. Where an organization is running educational programmes for both women and children, the latter receives greater inputs in terms of capacity building. Even research studies, as an indicator of the extent of focus on a particular sector, are directed almost exclusively at children's education.

Finding ways of helping women use and sustain their skills

One of the biggest challenges for organizations is how to facilitate the integration of literacy skills into the lived realities of learners. At the most basic level, where women members of savings and credit groups are not using their literacy to track their individual accounts, they need to be helped to start doing so. There is a need for interesting and relevant material to be created keeping in mind the literacy levels of learners. The study also shows that it is not enough to identify ways in which women can use their skills, continuous inputs and an enabling environment needs to be created in order that women begin to use those skills. The battle of confidence building is one that continues well beyond the initial phase of acquiring literacy skills.

In Sewa Mandir for example, field level workers need to actively encourage para workers who are meant to use their newly acquired literacy skills to write out their monthly reports and fill out other formats. The nervousness about their handwriting, spellings, grammar leads them to take the help of their children to fill out the sections other than the ones that requires very brief answers.

That acquisition of literacy skills does not automatically translate into use of skills is also demonstrated in the experience of women linked to the Swayam Shikshan Prayog, who had received school education as children, but only found enabling conditions to use the skills once they started working with SSP.

“After the age of 16 I never wrote a single word, even though I was educated. My father refused to let me work as it was taboo for women to leave the house. Such was the marginalisation of Patel women that when Devyani (an SSP field worker) first came to the village and requested me to take her around the village, I took her through all the dirty back lanes as women never moved about on the main roads of my village. My husband died and my son lost his hand in a factory. After that I became independent and started moving around on my own. “ At present Mangala Patil manages to perform a variety of roles in the Maha Sangha office including keeping the minutes register, conducting surveys, balancing the account books and calculating how many women can receive credit. SSP has provided women the opportunity to revive their reading and writing skills and to use them in a meaningful and sustained manner. Literacy skills have found a link with an ever expanding spiral of learning.

As the study shows, the opportunities are tremendous, particularly with women entering new roles that require them to use literacy. The challenge lies with the organizations as to how best to respond.

Capacity building of those involved in providing literacy opportunities

The teaching learning process in literacy is one that requires a degree of specialization. Sustained inputs are needed to work with a pedagogy which is appropriate, in this case, for adult women learners. This entails unlearning of the ways in which we were taught in school. Ways of sustaining literacy skills also requires detailed as well as creative thinking. Literacy work in that sense has a logic of its own, it demands time and attention being devoted in a sustained manner. Often this is difficult for organizations which are continuously responding to field related demands and situations. Given this, the capacity building efforts of organizations require much greater attention. It is also true that if literacy is not the primary agenda of the organization, as is mostly the case, the leadership of the organization may not be familiar enough with issues of pedagogy to be able to pose ‘good’ questions or make useful suggestions to the team. There is also the problem of dependence on external experts, whose withdrawal has been experienced as a problem. It needs to be mentioned that the larger context is one in which there are virtually no resource groups that can provide inputs in the area of women’s literacy. It also emerged from the study that there is a need to develop mechanisms whereby institutional learning can take place within the organization. Building on the experiences and understanding of the work in the area of women’s literacy, in a manner that new members of the team are able to benefit, would allow them to be even more effective as providers of literacy opportunities.

SLPs address the information needs of women for whom these sources have been negligible. They also provide opportunity for women to evolve their articulation of issues, depending upon the methodology/pedagogy used in varying degrees. Participatory and people centred pedagogy that is experiential has been more empowering. SLPs provide a platform for action in most cases, provided these are systematically planned and phased to enable people to internalize information and experiences and transference to action. Structured learning interventions – systematically planned with focused objectives and a pre negotiated content - are also organized to create opportunities for women to interface with mainstream processes as in the case of Panchayati Raj and interface with banking institutions. SLPs are more successful and empowering in transferring to implementation when each SL intervention is followed with an agenda for action and mechanisms for feedback and review of such learning are instituted. The pedagogy of learning within structured learning processes also determines the level of learner engagement and efficacy of learning inputs. The role of workers in this process demands a democratic facilitation of processes wherein women are enabled to plan and take informed actions and decisions, with the organization providing critical information inputs or the direction to seek these. In this process, literate and non-literate learners are able to support each other in the learning process.

3.3.4 Financial Resources

Constraints of capacity building need to be located in the critical issue of financial resources. The question of resources also becomes important because literacy needs to be a long term agenda for meaningful, sustainable literacy to take place. In the absence of security of resources for the length of time that this requires, it is very difficult for organizations to undertake literacy work. Four out of the five organizations involved in literacy work are experiencing problems relating to funding. The repercussions of a resource crunch have been very serious.

In the case of the Zila Saksharta Samiti, Mandi, the literacy campaign district unit which is part of the larger National Literacy Mission, long time lags between the three phases (Total Literacy Campaign, Post literacy and Continuing Education) have been disastrous. Women learners who were greatly enthused by the literacy centre in the village are bitter about having invested their energies in something which ground to a complete halt. Asked if they would be interested in resuming their learning if the centre was to start again, the answer was a categorical 'no'. It was only the most committed co-ordinators, who without being paid either salaries or travel costs, were attending monthly meetings. The flow of information and inputs from the district to the villages, which is how the programme was operating, all but stopped. The district found itself stuck between the National Literacy Mission (NLM) at the Centre and the State level machinery. According to the rules, the National government finances the literacy programme for the first three years, after which the State government is meant to provide half the funds for the next two years, which the Himachal government was unwilling to do. The Department of Education was trying to persuade the Department of Rural Development, which co-ordinates the work relating to Panchayats, to take over the CE programme. (This situation presents itself elsewhere in the country as well. Unlike ZSS and HGVS, who see this move as important in ensuring the long term continuity of the programme, there are others who are wary of locating Continuing Education within Panchayats for the fear that the CE agenda will get stuck in local political or become even lower priority for the government than it is at present.)

The financial crisis which ensued while the ball was being passed from one arm of the government to the other, led to a situation in which the energies of the ZSS were focussed entirely on trying to raise resources. The resources that can be accessed with lesser degree of difficulty were those that related to economic activities such as adoption of modern agricultural methods. This was clearly not a situation which allows for evolving strategies of how to help the vast numbers of neo-literates, the majority of whom were women, not to lose their fragile literacy

skills.

The leadership of Malar, which emerged from the Total Literacy Campaign in Kanyakumari district, had this to say about its experience with the district level government authorities. Their involvement with the TLC had been as members of the Tamil Nadu Science Forum, which sought to integrate the literacy agenda of the campaign with people's mobilization. As a result of their work, the district authorities had begun receiving several queries and complaints from learners who were part of the adult literacy programme. As the literacy opportunity created enhanced awareness and articulation of demands, it became unacceptable to the State, and support was withdrawn. The withdrawal came suddenly, with the TLC campaign apparently being terminated overnight by the District Collector. It is ironic that the feedback on the programme that the TLC activists had given about the need for more awareness and information dissemination activities directed at learners was used to justify the closure. He used this to say that since the groups now needed awareness more than literacy, the TLC was no longer required.

The leadership, in a desperate situation, needing to somehow maintain the cadre that had been built during the campaign, turned to savings and credit groups as the solution. Although this did prove to be a viable way of raising resources for the sustenance of the cadre, there are serious limits on the resources currently available for capacity building. Despite demands from women for literacy, the cadre, which gets its payment on a percentage basis depending on how many groups they are co-ordinating with, do not want to take on the additional responsibility of literacy work.

With Adithi the problem is one of changing priorities on the part of the funding organization which had introduced the organization to the REFLECT methodology and had provided all the capacity building inputs to the literacy workers. Adithi is now extremely concerned about the possible termination of funding for this aspect of its work.

4 LESSONS

4.1 Collaborative Research

It is unrealistic to expect a high degree of ownership during the course of the study. Although processes like the preparatory workshop were important in terms of involving the partner organizations, and there was a high degree of enthusiasm and perceived value of mutual learning, the study till date is perceived largely as 'Nirantar's study'. On reflecting upon this reality it does not seem surprising given that these organizations have no prior history of working together and the theme of the study is one that the organizations are not placing a high premium on. We realized that the process of building partnerships is a gradual one and initially contingent on the expectations and current needs of the organizations. Hence the nascent partnership was pegged on the interest of organizations in terms of the opportunity provided for exposure and capacity building of the workers involved in the study.

We should have dialogued with the heads of the organizations much more in the planning stage of the study. This would have increased their stakes in the study much more. This would mean, in the short term, a greater prioritization to the study in terms of accommodating the time commitment that the study required the workers of the organization to make. Engaging with the heads of organization at an earlier stage could have positively impacted on the primacy of women's literacy in their organizations

The limited time that workers of the organizations were able to devote to the study also had

implications for the kind of data it could generate. The involvement of the partner organizations did validate the expectation of richer insights, emerging from an engagement between different experiences and perspectives. However it also meant that there was a limit to the number of interactions that we could have, or even the extent of profiling that we were able to do.

The resources available through the GCG programme were extremely inadequate for the reworked strategy of undertaking the study in a partnership mode. Nirantar had to draw upon its internal resources, which was extremely difficult to do. There was a phase in between when our field visits came to a halt for lack of resources, contributing to a slowing down in the pace of the study.

4.2 Lobbying/Advocacy

The experience of the Consultation gave us valuable insights as to what works and what doesn't.

What worked was

- 11 The timing – The Consultation was planned such that it could impact the 10th five year plan process. This was the time that policy relating to gender and education was being formulated and decisions that would determine resource allocation were being taken. This was an element of the advocacy strategy that proved to be very effective.
- A clear, strategic focus - All decisions about who to involve, for what and when were taken carefully in keeping with the goal of advocacy in mind.
- Organizing a high profile national event gave visibility and energy to an issue that had for too long been marginalized.
- Involving the State in the process of sharing and reflection. The other option was for the Consultation to provide a forum only for academics and practitioners. This also provided visibility to Nirantar as an advocacy agency in the field of women's education
- One to one interactions to secure participation, generate interest and lobby.
- Selection of resource persons and individuals from the government – such that they could influence the process in the long run.
- Preparing ourselves with knowledge about how the system works with regards formulation of plans.

The decision to broad-base the theme of the Consultation on Gender and Education Policy was also a good one. Other than the organic and political linkages between various aspects of gender and education, a narrow focus on women's literacy alone would not have elicited the response that the Consultation got, and would thereby have not created the space for a concern which has become increasingly marginalized.

While this broad-basing was valuable, the experience of lobbying for the wide ranging recommendations that emerged from the Consultation was a mixed one. We succeeded in making a significant contribution towards maintaining the autonomy of the Mahila Samakhya programme. And yet it was difficult to make a dent in terms of the many other policy and programme issues the recommendations were addressing. One learning from this is that it is very difficult to lobby for a range of issues, there needs to be much more focussed targeting of specific concerns. A monitoring and lobbying agenda would be facilitated by the existence of a framework, possibly around international commitments made under Education for All or CEDAW. This is particularly true in the absence of an existing network around issues of gender and education.

4.3 Networking

In the initial stages, we expected that our efforts would lead to the creation of a forum which would engage with issues of women's education. We saw the partner organizations as being potential members of such a forum. We realized during the course of our work that this was an unrealistic expectation. Our analysis of why is this so is as follows:

- The marginalization of women's literacy is so acute that it became clear that the level of advocacy that was required at this stage was with the partner organizations themselves. The advocacy needs to be focus on making women's literacy a greater priority within these field-based organizations. Whether in terms of increasing women's access, enhancing the quality of educational interventions, making linkages between literacy and roles that women are playing, greater resources (both material and human) need to be invested in women's literacy. Efforts to inform and involve these organizations in advocacy directed at other NGOs and the State should be made but expectations should not be too high. A much longer process will be required before field based organizations can become active members in the advocacy process.
- As stated above, partner organizations were very enthusiastic about was the mutual learning that took place during the course of the study. We felt that they saw the study as an opportunity to gain an exposure and to build capacities of their workers. This was not a disappointment. It is becoming clear in fact that capacity building is probably the only organic way to generate interest and to get organizations working in the area of women's literacy to begin to associate, however loosely.

As was shared in the section relating to the Consultation on Gender and Education Policy, we realized the need to work with a wide range of stake holders (including those who are at present involved in educational work with women as well as those who we see as potential actors). We began to see during the course of our work that networking towards the creation of a forum needs nuanced and differentiated strategies. This understanding has informed how we see our advocacy strategies in the near future.

With those who are involved in advocacy on issues of education and focussing on elementary, school education, our effort would be to increase the space for gender issues relating to this sector, as well as to strategically bring into the discussion relevant concerns relating to women's literacy. At present the situation is such that there are forums which describe themselves as education forums and do not even recognize that they are focussing on a particular sector within the larger education paradigm, i.e. there is a failure to recognize that adult education and within that women's education is not being addressed by them at all.

With women's groups advocacy efforts will aim at we plan to focus on concerns which we know that they are much more likely and willing to engage with. This reflects in our plan to initiate a process of involving women's groups to undertake a systematic analysis of gender biases in school curricula and text books. This process will also address how gender is constructed in literacy primers used in adult literacy programmes and materials for neo-literate adult learners.

With field based NGOs the advocacy will involve demonstrating linkages between literacy, governance and women's empowerment. This would entail for example highlighting experiences which demonstrate what literacy has meant in terms of women's self image and their ability to gain greater control over their lives and the larger environment in which they are located.

Advocacy for a greater prioritization of women's literacy can be approached in various ways (not mutually exclusive at all). An approach that focussed on empowerment has been indicated above. A rights based approach would call for recognition that denial of educational opportunities to

women of marginalized sections of society, constitutes a violation of their fundamental right to have access to a resource which is recognized as a right of other sections of society in an unquestioning way – eg. Children’s right to education. We need to work with an awareness as to how different players are responding to arguments or strategies that we are using in our advocacy efforts.

4.4 About the GCG process

The selection of partner organizations was very good, it reflect a diversity and a seriousness and commitment to change.

The interregional structure could have mean more meaningful if there had been the opportunity of some ‘face to face’ interaction. Somehow despite presentations, and admittedly very little reading, on the work being done in South Africa, it remained a rather hazy, far-off reality.

As stated earlier, inputs received at one of the regional meetings were critical to Nirantar making the valuable shift in strategy towards a partnership model of the study. Inputs about what was feasible and realistic were also extremely helpful. It would have saved resources (including time) if these inputs could have been given earlier.

In terms of the training on Gender, Citizenship and Good Governance we felt that more information about the level at which the training was pitched would have helped us take a more appropriate decision as to who from within the team would most benefit from the inputs provided. More focussed and advance levels of input in the areas of research and advocacy would have been extremely useful. If these inputs could be organized in the future it would benefit us greatly. A feed back on the training that we would like to share is that the level of understanding and wealth of experience of the resource persons in the training could have been used to a fuller degree.

It was valuable to have Lalitha at the preparatory workshop. She made an extremely interesting presentation, which located the discourse on women’s education in a historical perspective.

Maitrayee’s enthusiasm and well articulated support to the cause of women’s literacy in a rights perspective was heartening. In the GCG forum as in others, there would otherwise have been a sense of isolation on the issue. What we did not get a sense of, owing to the limited interaction on issues that partner organizations were involved with, is whether discussions on our project impacted their perceptions in any way.

We would like to express our appreciation of the help that Maitrayee extended in accessing funds for the next phase of the programme, from the Royal Netherlands Embassy.

The pace of the programme might have move faster, and would have had greater space for more cross cutting analytical discussions, if the initial phase of identifying and finalizing the research question being addressed by each of the organizations could have been finalized. Maybe this could have been achieved by greater one to one interactions with the organizations involved.

The culture and style of interacting of the coordinators was extremely non-threatening. There was in the initial stage a lack of clarity about who which coordinator would be responsible for which organizations. Also maybe if we, including Nirantar, had been more active in seeking and giving inputs on email, on the basis of reports, it might have been useful.

The e-group experience like most other e-groups was that it was difficult to get us to engage with

it.

It was interesting that the process that the action research study was in some ways similar to the GCG process in that it involved a number of organizations, sought to develop a minimal common understanding, co-ordination etc. One respect in which both the processes could have stronger we feel is if there was space for collective reflection and analysis of the findings of different organizations, before the report writing stage. (Since regional meetings are an expensive proposition, maybe we could have had a national meeting. Partner organizations could have paid for their travel. This could also maybe have been the alternative to Lalitha individually visiting each of the organizations.) With the action-research study, the time frame was such that Nirantar has done the first level of analysis of all the field visits on its own. Although we are having a workshop in August with the partner organizations at which we will reflect on the findings and plan for the future. Even with the GCG process, the discussions at the meetings have been primarily located in the contexts of specific projects, we could not really move to a more cross-cutting analysis. Maybe we could work towards responding to the draft overall report Maitrayee prepares, within a strict time frame.

It would have been useful to have been encouraged to think and make suggestions about the GCG process during the course of the programme. The GCG process came at a very opportune time for Nirantar and played an important role in our entry into the realm of advocacy. Nirantar was in a state of preparedness to move from work focussed on a more micro level to a more outward looking role. It coincided with a process of internal review within Nirantar which was leading us towards playing a more proactive role in terms of networking and advocacy. With our participation in GCG, this shift happened in a definitive way – and after that there's been no looking back!!

Last but not the least one of the most enjoyable experiences was the farewell organized by Bangladesh Mahila Parishad, on the concluding day of the last regional meeting.

5 CONCLUSIONS

Generalized lessons for good practice

From our experience of attempting to draw a focus on women's literacy, we feel that networking, lobbying and advocacy efforts around a marginalized issue would be helped by

- Using strategically time high-profile events to draw attention to the issue
- Using capacity building as the building blocks for building networks
- Networking with organizations/forums that are active in the larger domain, who are may not be directly involved in the issue.
- Going beyond a simple demand and supply analysis. Often areas of concern that are marginalized need a deeper exploration of assumptions and perceptions. In this process it might be useful to evoke and highlight the perceptions of the group whose interest is being marginalized and to posit that against the perceptions/stated objectives of the institutions of governance.

Changing strategies along the way in order to meet the desired goal if it is felt that the new

strategy would work better in the given context, is something we would highly recommend.

Post-Script

The presentation of the study at the conference in Cochin pushed us further in terms of the larger framework in which to locate the learnings. The use of the rights framework we feel was a powerful tool for advocacy, for literacy to be considered a woman's right. We applied the key concepts of the rights discourse in order to critique the existing situation as well as to argue for a prioritization of women's literacy in the agenda of the institutions of governance. The concepts and the manner in which we applied in the context of women and literacy are as follows -

Inter-relatedness of rights:

Women's right to literacy is related and inter-dependant with other rights of women. Literacy creates avenues for women to a range of civil, cultural, political, economic and social rights. One right cannot be pursued by negating others, since each is essential and equal.

And yet the study indicates that a sense of hierarchies prevails between rights. Organizations tend to focus on one set to the neglect or negation of others. Most organizations focus on either literacy or empowerment /governance.

Agency Beyond Participation:

Participation to be active, free and meaningful, requires the inclusion of literacy as a means for people to access and have agency in forums and processes of participation.

The study validates this. Literate women in all the organizations studied have greater access to leadership positions and networks. By virtue of their position in networks they have greater opportunities for exposure and further learning.

Legally Enforceable Entitlements – Accountability:

States must have the political will and the means to ensure the realization of all human rights, and must put in place the necessary legislative, administrative and institutional mechanisms to achieve the same.

We find however, a wide gap between commitments made by the Indian State and their implementation, especially in the realm of women's literacy.

No Trade Off With Development Goals:

By definition, rights approaches are incompatible with development policies, projects or activities that have the effect of violating rights, or postulate trade-offs with rights.

And yet we find literacy being circumvented. Efforts have in fact been made to enable women to function without literacy.

Attention to marginalized sections:

A rights-based approach pays particular attention to discrimination, equality, equity and vulnerable groups. It addresses the question of who is vulnerable and how. It calls for a disaggregated view across categories of human rights.

And yet organizations tend to provide greater access to educational opportunities to children than to women. Institutions are aware of the reality of the power dynamics that might ensue between an educated leadership and other members of the forum. Yet little is done to redress these.

Centrality Of The Individual/Group:

The expression of literacy as a right entitles and enables individuals to exercise rights and perform duties as well as abstain from the violation of such towards the fulfilment of such rights of each individual.

The study validates this. Literacy has enabled women to feel more confident and self-assured in their dealings with others. This confidence at the individual level has been greatly strengthened by the collectives that women are part of. Issues impacting upon the group as a class have been addressed collectively, with literate women playing a lead role.