PUBLICLY RIGHTING PRIVATE WRONGS: FEDERAL RESPONSES TO VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN IN INDIA

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

India’s central government responses to violence against women have often been unsatisfactory, primarily because these reactions and reforms have failed to adequately account for dramatic cultural variations across regions. Rigid, diverse traditions pose serious challenges to top-down reform. Government interventions that advance social justice at the community level, however, can change broader trends through the national resonance of local cultures. The Mahila Samakhya Program, which allows women to work for gender equity within their own communities, is a crucial example: it has had the powerful effect of mitigating violence against women at the state level. This initiative and the innovative, localized projects it has facilitated have great potential to foster gender justice and equity across diverse regions in India. It is unique as a community-level answer to a national problem, and it has powerful implications for central governments interested in regionally diverse reform.

THE MAHILA SAMAKHYA PROGRAM

The Government of India’s Mahila Samakhya Program is a central government tool that aims to change culture by empowering groups of women within their communities. Sponsored by the Ministry of Human Resource Development, the Mahila Samakhya Program is autonomous and operates strategically as both a government...
program and a voluntary movement. The program itself does not have a formal structure but is instead a broad framework for adaptive program implementation in various contexts. This structure allows for regional innovation and flexibility while also preserving the government authority of implementers. According to Gujarat State Program Director Trupti Sheth, “Our plan is area-specific because problems vary across India. We have to deliver within traditional systems.” The flexibility of the program, says Sheth, allows for interventions in situations ranging from divorce to dowry disputes, depending on community needs. In the spirit of giving women ownership of reform in their communities, the Mahila Samakhyta Program lays a foundation for grassroots movements that mobilize the assets of specific regions. This process begins with the organization of sanghas, or collectives, of 25-40 women who meet regularly once or twice a month. The sanghas are composed primarily of wage laborers from families who do not own land, which sets this program apart from other government programs.

**VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN IN THE INDIAN CONTEXT**

Adequately addressing gender-based violence in India is urgent and complicated. India has recently been internationally criticized for high levels of violence against

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5 Trupti Sheth, Personal interview with the author, March 30, 2014.

6 Mahila Samakhyta 10th Five Year Plan, 3.


8 Mahila Samakhyta Programme: Genesis, 3.

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women: some reports show that an Indian woman is raped every 20 minutes. In Delhi alone, a rape is reported to the police every 18 hours. These levels of violence constitute a critical human rights concern across diverse regions, religious groups, and ethnic divisions. Changing the underlying social phenomena that allow violence against women to exist across diverse regions and communities in India is a daunting federal challenge, but it is not impossible.

Most studies of violence against women in India thus far have focused on familial or community factors and have generally employed household-level and individual-level surveys of determinants of violence. As an exploration of state-wise data on reported rape over the last 35 years, my thesis addresses this gap in scholarship and has valuable implications for broader and more effective national solutions to gender-based violence. Many of India’s most progressive legal responses to violence have occurred relatively recently, making them difficult to assess. It is clear based on an examination of past reforms, however, that the law is not a comprehensive way of ensuring justice for women. For example, the Hindu Succession Act was meant to extend the rights of women to own property, but it and subsequent amendments have sometimes put women in greater danger of domestic or communal violence by contradicting local customs in seemingly threatening ways.

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12 Ibid., 274.
Legal reform at the federal level is limited in its potential to effectively protect Indian women from violence, but proactive, regionalized women’s empowerment schemes have the potential to make the spirit of new, protective laws a cultural reality. The cultural effects of the Mahila Samakhya Program have powerful implications for the capacity of central governments to successfully address sensitive social justice situations across multi-ethnic communities. Furthermore, improving and broadening the implementation of this program has the potential to serve as a nuanced and effective answer to the problem of gender-based violence in India.

**ADDRESSING VIOLENCE THROUGH SOCIAL CHANGE**

India’s government has a responsibility to address violence against women at the national level, but the challenges of implementation across multi-ethnic states are formidable. Resource theorists suggest that material empowerment, like employment or property ownership can, in certain regions, put Indian women in positions where gender-based violence is seen as a way of restoring an appropriate gender balance within a family, as illustrated by the Hindu Succession Act and its effects. Personal interviews, historical and ethnographic research, and analysis of primary and secondary sources on the issue suggest clearly that regional cultural factors have strong and varied effects on levels of gender-based violence across India. These social mores are the critical factors that federal women’s empowerment programs have the potential to influence.

**Why the Mahila Samakhya Program?**

The Indian Government has undertaken a number of schemes meant to advance
the welfare of women. Generally, India’s central government women’s empowerment initiatives are disjointed, scattering resources across diverse needs with little intra-governmental coordination. According to India’s first female Chief Secretary, Shailaja Chandra, these inefficiencies are to blame for central government failures to protect women: “It is not for want of laws. It is for want of schemes that actually deliver.”

Many of these schemes focus on family development and protection instead of women specifically. Other programs are directed toward securing and promoting women’s employment. Based on the resource theory discussed herein, however, it seems likely that these funds, while useful in specific contexts, could cause familial or communal conflict within certain traditional settings in which women owning property or managing money are not yet widely accepted as appropriate.

The larger problem with most Indian government women’s empowerment schemes is that they represent a dispersion of resources across a variety of populations, and most center on service delivery and resource distribution. More could be accomplished with a broader conceptual focus that made use of India’s substantial implementation machinery, regional assets, and need for diverse cultural interventions. The Mahila Samakhya Program is a community-based initiative that fills this role.

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14 The National Mission for Empowerment of Women is meant to coordinate women’s welfare and socio-economic development across Ministries and Departments, but as it was sanctioned quite recently, in April 2011, it is difficult to assess its progress.

15 Chandra, Personal interview with the author.

16 “Welfare Schemes for Women.” For example, the Rajiv Gandhi National Crèche Scheme for the Children of Working Mothers provides day care facilities to children under six years of age for low income families, and the Swadhar Greh Scheme was introduced in 2001 to provide temporary accommodation to women and girls rendered homeless due to family discord, crime, or violence. Similarly, the Indira Gandhi Matritva Sahyog Yojana was introduced in October 2010 in order to provide cash incentives for improved health and nutrition to pregnant and nursing mothers.

17 Ibid.
Analysis of the Program’s Impact

My thesis evaluates the Mahila Samakhya Program through regional surveys, personal interviews, and a statistical comparison of state-wise rates of reported rape between matched states with and without the program, all of which strongly indicated the program’s potential to empower women and engender justice both locally and nationally.

Because of the program’s autonomy and flexibility at the local level, it has given way to a variety of successful projects. *Sangha* members have collaborated on solving individual and collective problems, and the Joint Review Mission (JRM) of the program reported that these women have been successful in increasing female enrollment in schools, creating dialogues with men and women on gender relations and justice, and expanding women’s choices and agency. According to Sheth, “Women are partners of the program. That’s why they work with us.”18 Through the *sanghas*, women collaborate on familial and communal problems, asserting their ability to contribute productively in constructive, specific ways. In Bihar, for example, the Mahila Samakhya Program has involved training in non-traditional professions like masonry and water pump repair. Unique programs like these have succeeded in allowing women in various contexts to break stereotypes and establish independence.19

The program also has direct links to addressing violence against women. In Gujarat, the program offers counseling services to women dealing with situations of violence. In approaching this counseling center, Sheth notes that women “feel like, ‘This

18 Sheth, Personal interview with the author.

is my maternal home,’” indicating the level of support and dignity they find. Sanghas also often intervene in cases of domestic violence or child marriage within their villages and are able to bring challenging issues like desertion, divorce, land rights, rape, and bigamy to local women’s courts or higher government officials.

Rates of rape have increased across India in the last 35 years. In states with the Mahila Samakhya Program, however, there is a marked difference in levels of violence as compared to states without it: rates of reported rape have increased significantly more dramatically in states without the Mahila Samakhya Program over this period of time, based on a comparison of three sets of paired states that share a number of other significant socio-cultural and legal characteristics, differing only in the presence of the Mahila Samakhya Program. This difference indicates that the program is not only anecdotally successful in empowering individual women but also in advancing women’s rights on a broad scale, as it suggests that states with the program have not experienced the increases in violence against women that they would have seen without the presence of the program and its effects. Moreover, case studies of successful Mahila Samakhya initiatives in Gujarat and Karnataka support the evidence reported by the JRM and the results of my statistical research: these state interventions are efficient and effective innovations for the Indian government.

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20 Sheth, Personal interview with the author.
21 Ibid.
22 The program was piloted in ten districts of three states in 1989: Uttar Pradesh, Karnataka, and Gujarat. These states were chosen because of their diverse cultural backgrounds, and the districts in which the program was implemented were selected by government officials and representatives of non-governmental organizations based on indicators of high gender inequality such as low female literacy rates, poor enrollment and retention of girls in schools, and low socio-economic development. By 2008, the program had expanded to nine states: Andhra Pradesh, Assam, Bihar, Jharkhand, Kerala, and Uttarakhand in addition to the original three.
23 See pages 98-105.
24 See pages 105-110.
mobilization of unique resources in Kerala, such as collaboration with IT companies, exemplify the program’s potential to address local problems with local solutions, solving broad problems in innovative and culturally appropriate ways.

**Opportunities for Improvement**

With promising recent reforms to India’s legal and judicial framework for gender-based violence in place, the central government should focus on the ways that it can affect cultural change across India through this already successful program. According to gender activist and grassroots organizer Nandini Azad, “The government needs to prepare the field instead of getting in one more law.”

The Mahila Samakhya Program is a promising field intervention. Currently, the program has only been implemented in 89 districts in nine of India’s 28 states and seven Union Territories, and it could be improved in the states in which it has been implemented. Reevaluating the program’s organizational structure as it expands will be critical, and making more data on its achievements available is essential to administrative accountability and identification of best practices. Expanding reporting and analysis of achievements – like that undertaken in my thesis – is also central to extricating real successes from rhetoric. A good first step in program expansion would be the creation of a comprehensive manual of the best practices of existing Mahila Samakhya Programs to guide new chapters.

Because the Mahila Samakhya Program is grounded in social mobilization based on local assets and needs – as opposed to direct delivery of services or goods – expansion and organization is a time and resource intensive process. Rapid expansion, while

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25 Azad, Personal interview with the author.

26 Expansion and Coverage.
tempting, would be unwise. Currently, large staff vacancies in existing states require immediate attention; diluting an already low staff capacity would be imprudent.\textsuperscript{27} The use of federations of \textit{sanghas} to shift ownership of the program from government parties to the women involved is a promising solution, but this transition should be undertaken with care and would be best restricted to the states with established programs at present. Similarly, partnerships with other NGOs or government programs are valuable, but unrestricted convergence of ideals and practices could be damaging to the Mahila Samakhya Program, which is unique in its holistic community focus. Being co-opted into programs that focus only on service delivery or resource distribution is a risk of rapid partnership and would be a great loss.\textsuperscript{28} However, because the program is adaptable and has demonstrated successes in states across India, the model does not pose any state-specific obstacles.\textsuperscript{29} Though initially difficult, expansion would be worthwhile.

Critical review of investments would be another good next step for the program, particularly in terms of initiatives that might sound tempting but result in well-intentioned misuses of funds, as is the case in herbal medicine units in Jharkhand and Uttarakhand that lack viable business plans.\textsuperscript{30} The program in Gujarat, in contrast, has capitalized successfully on regional knowledge of Ayurveda, a system of traditional medicine, to provide services to women in need and to produce exports, so streamlining sharing of

\textsuperscript{27} Fourth Joint Review Mission of Mahila Samakhya, 7.

\textsuperscript{28} Ibid., 8.

\textsuperscript{29} Because the eight states of Northeast India – Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Tripura, and Sikkim – are administered under the Ministry of Development of North East Region (MDONER), implementing the program in this region might be logistically complicated in some ways, but the Mahila Samakhya Program fits well with the mandate and responsibilities of the MDONER.

\textsuperscript{30} Ibid., 35.
best practices across states would be a useful part of that evaluation. Similarly, vocational training remains something of a weakness within the program, which could provide valuable services by capitalizing on its regional specificity by investing in creating more practical ways for women to move toward varieties of financial independence that fit best with their social contexts. Expanding the program to urban environments is another area in which potential growth could have a powerful impact.

**CONCLUSIONS**

Ultimately, the expansion of the Mahila Samakhya Program is a pressing and worthwhile goal for India’s central government, as this program has demonstrated successes that indicate its potential to shape gender equity and empowerment across the country by changing community-level attitudes and injustices. Consolidating women’s empowerment programs by investing in this initiative would be wise: the Mahila Samakhya Program is capable of ensuring the efficient use of federal resources and of advancing the central government goals of protecting women in practical ways across regionally, religiously, and culturally diverse communities in India. By influencing local social norms, the Mahila Samakhya Program holds promise as a way of making India’s de jure protection from gender-based violence a reality for women across varied regional and cultural contexts.

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31 Sheth, Personal interview with the author.

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