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Role of Collectives – Strengthening State Accountability, Promoting Women’s Rights Achieving Gender equality

* The views expressed in this paper are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of the United Nations.

Role of Collectives – Strengthening State Accountability, Promoting Women’s Rights Achieving Gender equality

Women have been left behind – this is now known through many parameters and indicators. While there are some gains for some of the women, the pace of change is much slower and achieving gender equality is known to remain a distant reality. And yet we do have evidence from civil society organisations and a few government initiatives that are indicative of measures that accelerate change. There is strong evidence that working in collectives especially for women from marginalised realities offers great strategic and actual value to bring about lasting shifts in access to entitlements, to resources, and in changing discriminatory gender norms operating through the family and the community.

The Problem

Maternal Mortality Collaborators (2016) find that 24 countries still had a maternal mortality ratio greater than 400. Further when they examined the relationship between maternal mortality and coverage of specific reproductive health care services as a function of the Socio economic Index (a summary indicator derived from measures of income per capita, educational attainment, and fertility) they find that the proportion of all maternal deaths occurring in the bottom two SDI quintiles where haemorrhage is the dominant cause of maternal death increased from roughly 68% in 1990 to more than 80% in 2015. Since then, there has been an improvement in the overall maternal mortality ratio (number of women who die from pregnancy-related causes while pregnant or within 42 days of pregnancy termination per 100,000 live births) in India has improved from 384 in 2000 to 103 in 2020, which is better than the South Asian average of 138 and the average of lower middle-income countries at 255 in 2020. (World Bank Gender Data Portal)

Despite this progress, there is a long way to go as indicated by the levels of women’s adult literacy, labour force participation, presence in vulnerable employment, employment in senior and middle management, unpaid care work burden, asset ownership and presence in parliament (Gender Data Portal: India).

The gap in adult literacy (percentage of people ages 15 and above who can both read and write with understanding a short simple statement about their everyday life) between men and women is constant throughout the world. In 2018, the adult literacy rate among men in India was 82.4% as compared to women’s 65.8%, while the South Asian average for men was 80.9% and for women was 65.2% and the average for lower middle-income countries was 84.5% for men and 72.9% for women.

The data for labour force participation rate (proportion of the population ages 15 and older that is economically active) is particularly concerning for gender equality goals. Female labour force participation in India has declined since 1990. In 2022, the labour force participation rate among women stood at 24% and among men stood at 73.6%. The corresponding figures for South Asia were 25.6% and 74.7% respectively. The gap was significantly smaller when all lower middle-income countries (35% and 74% respectively) and the world (47.3% and 72.5% respectively) were considered.

Further, even when women participate in the labour force, their presence is disproportionately higher in vulnerable employment (work that lacks formal work arrangements, social protection, and safety nets to guard against economic shocks), when compared to men. Data from 2021 suggests that in India, 77.3% of women were in vulnerable employment as opposed to 72.9% of men; corresponding figures for South Asia were 74.1% and 67.3% and for lower middle-income countries were 66.4% and 58.5%. At the same time, women’s share of employment in senior and middle management in India falls in the lowest quintile of all countries for which data is available. Data collected in 2022 suggests that women made up 16.2% of those employed in senior and middle management in India, as opposed to 64% in Jamaica, 59% in Botswana and 56% in the Dominican Republic. Some countries which fared worse than India were Yemen at 5% and Afghanistan at 6%.

Women's absence from the labour force can to a great extent be explained by their disproportionate burden of unpaid care responsibilities. Globally, women dedicate more time to unpaid care work than men; this ranges from a maximum of 490 minutes in a day in Cabo Verde (2012) to a minimum of 169 minutes in Taiwan, China (2004) and 178 minutes in Thailand (2014). The average time devoted to unpaid care work for women globally (including 75 countries) is 277 minutes per day. In contrast, men dedicate a maximum of 246 minutes per day in Cabo Verde and a minimum of 18 minutes in Cambodia; the world average for men is 111 minutes per day (Charmes, 2019)¹.

Entrepreneurship is an emerging area of employment for both men and women, yet it is not free from the inequalities present in the other sectors of employment. The Global Entrepreneurship Monitor's 2021/22 report finds that two out of every five early-stage entrepreneurs that are active globally are women. However, they make up only one in three high-growth entrepreneurs and one in three innovation entrepreneurs who are focused on national and international markets. National experts report that in most countries, the enabling environment for entrepreneurship favours men over women. (Global Entrepreneurship Monitor, 2022).

Asset ownership is another source of economic empowerment as indicated by its positive influence on women's nutritional and health outcomes, and children's schooling. In 2016, 33% of men in India did not own a house, while 62.9% of women did not own a house. At the same time, 39.1% of men owned a house individually, while 10.6% of women owned a house individually ([Gender Data Portal: India](#)).

Studies across the world show that women play a pivotal role in most livelihoods related to land – be it farming, forest produce, cattle grazing or fishing. However, there are no official statistics to quantify this. As we know, India has seen an increase in feminisation in agriculture, with more men migrating to cities for work. A 2013 OXFAM study states that while 80% of farm work is undertaken by women, they own only 13% of the land. A recent 2018 study by the University of Maryland and the National Council of Applied Economic Research (NCAER, 2018) states that women constitute over 42% of the agricultural labour force in India but own less than 2% of farmland. While numbers differ across sources, two issues get highlighted: 1) Low level of access, control, and ownership of land by women and 2) Lack of authentic gender segregated data.

Along with land, women also have worse access to nutrition than men, which makes them more susceptible to food shortages, food insecurity and death malnutrition related mortality. In 2021, 31.9% of women globally were moderately or severely food insecure, as opposed to 27.6% of men (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, n.d.). Much of the data on food security only studies gender for its importance in reproduction, i.e., the impact of mothers' nutrition on their children, but women also have a right to food as individuals. Women's food security is adversely affected by factors such as: eating last and the least in the family and their limited participation in income generating activities and decision making. Despite playing an important role in producing food and putting it on the table, women suffer from unequal access to food and evidence suggests that greater gender inequality leads to hungrier people on a national level (Selva & Janoch, 2022).

UN Women notes that women's economic empowerment is not only limited to their ability to participate in markets and have access to and control over productive resources but is also intrinsically linked with their ability to meaningfully participate in economic decision-making in their households as well as in political institutions at various levels (Facts and Figures: Economic Empowerment, n.d.). Although the proportion of women in parliament (percentage of parliamentary seats in a single or lower chamber held by women) in India has increased over the years, at 14.9%, it remained below the corresponding figures for South Asia (18.2%), lower middle-income countries (22.1%) and the world (26.5%) even in 2022 ([Gender Data Portal: India](#)). However, in the last few decades a "silent revolution" has occurred in India as a result of political reservations in local elected offices, resulting in physical representation of women

¹ Some inconsistencies may be generated by differences in methodologies in different countries.

in politics, even if not meaningful. A more important part of the “silent revolution” has transpired at the grassroots in the form of collective mobilisation of women (Prillaman, 2020).

Another significant aspect that has gained attention is the relationship between corruption and gender inequality. Various studies looking at corruption in the delivery of humanitarian relief to corruption at local bureaucratic levels are pointing to gender differentials in the impact of corruption.

Women’s relative lack of political and economic leverage reduces their ability to demand accountability or to highlight their specific experiences of and concerns about corruption – both corruption at a high level as well as petty corruption – low level corruption, and bureaucratic corruption. In growing recognition of how corruption affects women and girls, development practitioners are expanding traditional definitions of corruption to include actions that are disproportionately experienced by women, such as sexual extortion and human trafficking.

One reason for corruption's disproportionately negative impact on women is that women form the majority of the global poor. The poor, reliant on publicly provided services, disproportionately suffer when corruption depletes the number of resources available to those services (Schimmel and Pech, 2004; Khadiagala, 2001). In contexts where bribery has become a prerequisite to accessing services, rights and resources, women’s relatively weaker access to and control of personal resources has meant that they are more frequently denied access to these services (Nyamu-Musembi, 2007).

Against the backdrop of these deprivations, it is important to remember that women and girls are also the victims of one of the most pervasive and systemic human rights violations, i.e., violence. UN Women reports that globally, an estimated 736 million women — almost one in three — have been subjected to physical and/or sexual intimate partner violence, non-partner sexual violence, or both at least once in their life, that is, even without including instances of sexual harassment. Notably, violence against women is predominantly perpetrated by their current or former spouses or intimate partners. A staggering 26%, which amounts to over 640 million women aged 15 and above, have endured intimate partner violence (Facts and Figures: Ending Violence Against Women, 2023).

Technology has increased the ways in which women are subjected to violence. Although there is a lack of global-level data, evidence from various countries highlight this trend. One in 10 women in the European Union has faced some form of online violence since the age of 15, while 60% of women internet users in the Arab States have faced the same issue. Unfortunately, less than 40% of the women who have been victims of violence have made efforts to seek support, especially from formal institutions, such as the police. While at least 162 countries have passed laws on domestic violence, there exists a large gap between these laws and their implementation in most countries (Facts and Figures: Ending Violence Against Women, 2023).

Many feminist organisations, like ISST, have attempted to broaden the notion of violence against women to beyond physical and sexual violence to include less apparent forms of violence, like psychological, emotional and economic. The UN Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women adopted in 1993 defines violence against women as “any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life” (UN, 1993). Social systems and institutions not only influence interpersonal violence, like intimate partner violence, but also structural violence, with the latter taking the shape of poverty and social inequality (Montesanti, 2015). Structural violence refers to the type of violence which does not have any direct perpetrators, rather this type of violence is built into the structure and results in unequal power and unequal life chances, along with the denial of basic needs (Galtung, 1969). Unequal distribution of and access to resources is one of the most prominent forms of structural violence; this includes financial, educational and healthcare resources. Women experience structural violence more intensely because of their social position in a patriarchal society (Sinha et al., 2017). Further, structural violence can create conditions of deprivation and inequality, which facilitate gendered interpersonal violence (Montesanti, 2015).

Moreover, Verma and ISST (2023) point out that individuals may experience harm because of their factual or perceived sex, gender, sexual orientation and/or gender identity, and since this is not limited to women, they describe it as gender-based violence (GBV). GBV manifests itself in the form of a lack of opportunities and mobility, dispossession, invisibility or misrepresentation in the media and exoticisation of women and other gender non-conforming workers; this is detrimental to individuals' quality of life and dignity and prevents them from enjoying complete economic, social and cultural citizenship. Further, to overcome GBV, the artificial divide of women's work in public and private spaces must be challenged, along with the realisation that violence against gender and sexual minorities occurs across the continuum of space. The state, with the support of other patriarchal institutions, plays a critical role in upholding this systemic violence (Verma & ISST, 2023).

The situation remains grave and though we have had increased attention to reducing the gap between men and women and to address issues of equity for all across the gender spectrum taking into account the intersectionality that occurs due to class, caste, ethnic, religion and geographic factors.

Achieving Gender Equality and Poverty Eradication through Enhanced State Accountability – Role of Collectives

Barriers to women's social and economic development are now well known – patriarchy that operates through family, community, market and the state, intersectionality that arises from class, caste, ethnic, religious and sexual identities only exacerbate the impact of poorly designed policies and programs. It is the nature of the state and its relation to its citizens that it considers them in their individual capacity. Batliwala quotes one of the founder members of the organisation ANANDI² to state that “when you don't have access to a right, you collectivise to fight for that right. But when the law comes in, it always focusses on the individual. Fighting for your right can be a lonely process” (Batliwala et al 2022).

Therefore, programs targeting individual women, whether in the form of reservations or different kinds of affirmative action take much longer to bring about real changes in women's lives. When women collectivise, they are better able to overcome barriers posed by gender norms at various levels to claim benefits and opportunities provided in policies and programs. Women's movements in the Global South attempt to bring about social reform by involving grassroots activism and making claims on the state for women's rights (Molyneux, 2001). In fact, one of the core objectives of the international women's movement is to establish global norms and rules for gender equality to increase state accountability (Kardam, 2004).

In the following section, various examples of women's collective action **supported by state funding** and their impact on various aspects of women's development and economic empowerment have been presented.

The Deendayal Antyodaya Yojana-National Rural Livelihoods Mission (DAY-NRLM) was launched in June 2011 to empower rural women by organising them into Self-Help Groups (SHGs), where they can increase their incomes and improve their quality of life. SHGs are small, federated, village level micro-credit groups of women (Prillaman, 2020). DAY-NRLM is organised into various levels, starting with SHGs of 10-15 women at the village level; multiple SHGs in a village combine to form a Village Organisation (VO) and multiple VOs in a block combine to form a Cluster Level Federation (CLF). Every CLF receives guidance and assistance from a Block Nodal Officer (Nodal) who is a Block level staff member (Uppal & Sengupta, 2022). The NRLM Dashboard reports that as of 2023, DAY-NRLM

² ANANDI's gender transformative approach is rooted in transforming both institutions and social relations; this includes women's enhanced control over their bodies, labour, time, life choices and resources. Further, *Sangathans*, encouraged by ANANDI, have organised to challenge violence against women and have participated in male “panchs” (community-level dispute resolution systems) and formed women-led “nyay samitis” (justice committees) to bring about structural change. These changes have also encouraged rural women to publicly address the violence faced by them and shed the stigma associated with the same (Batliwala et al., 2022).

has covered 34 states and union territories, including 728,281 villages in 742 districts. Through its efforts, NRLM has mobilised 902.5 lakh households into SHGs and promoted 83.8 lakh SHGs and 446,420 VOs. In this period, Rs. 592,760.7 lakh of revolving fund and Rs. 1,961,203.3 lakh of community investment fund has been disbursed to SHGs (Ministry of Rural Development, 2023). Since 2016, DAY-NRLM has adopted a gender integration strategy, which attempts to facilitate capacity building of staff and community institutions (Uppal & Sengupta, 2022).

In addition to the national programme, every state has its own State Rural Livelihoods Mission (SRLM), which has some autonomy. The Madhya Pradesh State Rural Livelihoods Mission (MPSRLM) has expressed a particular interest in adopting a gender strategy with a focus on capacity building, resulting in the inclusion of gender strategies in their Annual Action Plans (AAP) (Uppal & Sengupta, 2022). Sheopur district of MP was selected for the implementation of the Gender Justice Program (GJP), which strived to empower rural women to present their aspirations and demands on the MPSRLM platforms; the success of the programme inspired an upscaling to 18 districts, covering 19 blocks and 60 CLFs. The GJP was implemented by a civil society organisation (CSO), ANANDI, with the assistance of MPSRLM and the International Center for Research on Women (ICRW). ANANDI's main objective was to train rural women to become community leaders (Samta Sakhis), who would raise, represent and resolve rural women's concerns, strengthen community institutions to respond to gender concerns and facilitate gender mainstreaming with the support of MPSRLM. Samta Sakhis received a monthly honorarium from ANANDI, along with intensive and immersive training from Master Trainers, which equipped them with the skills necessary to train other women at the VO and CLF levels (Uppal & Sengupta, 2022).

Samta Sakhis emerged as feminist community leaders who played the pivotal role of educating the community about their rights and entitlements and mobilising them to appeal to local leaders and institutions in case of non-delivery. Increased information and awareness, including about strategies for social action, allowed the Samta Sakhis to hold their local leaders, like the Panchayat Secretary, accountable (Sengupta et al., 2022). Over time, Samta Sakhis also came to adopt a gender-sensitive and rights-based approach in their work and built social capital through their engagement with different state and community actors. Further, the Lok Adhikar Kendras (LAKs), managed by Samta Sakhis and Master Trainers, and the Block Gender Forum (BGF) were established at the block level under the GJP to simplify women's access to their entitlements, such as pensions, identity cards, ration and other resources that they are often promised but never provided by the government. Samta Sakhis have been at the forefront of much of the social action related to the delivery of public goods and services as well as presenting other concerns of VO members to the relevant local authorities, which has allowed many rural women to also gain a voice and visibility in public spaces (Uppal & Sengupta, 2022). One of the key principles imbibed in the sakhis during their training is that collective action can secure greater victories than individual action by integrating gender with community institutions to drive positive social transformation and advance women's rights (Sengupta et al., 2022).

Sengupta et al. (2022) highlight a case where Samta Sakhis inspired collective action to address an issue that primarily concerned women — the lack of availability of drinking water, which forced women to spend a significant proportion of their day in travelling to collect water. The Samta Sakhis mobilised 40 women and presented their concerns to the Sarpanch, who succumbed to the collective pressure despite initial resistance and approved the construction of a borewell.

Prillaman (2020) has studied women from some of the SHGs formed under this national program in India and observes, “these women's groups in many respects act as laboratories for democratic deliberation, providing an institutional space for women to experiment with political voice and civic engagement. Through political dialogue over repeated interactions, women explore their political preferences and interests, practice deliberation, develop confidence and authority, and accumulate civic skills useful for costly political action”.

“In addition to action oriented around gender-based violence, women described their desire to improve the delivery of services that were either unavailable or poorly administered. In doing so, they demanded

accountability from elected officials in the implementation of local policy and sought programmatic provision of services historically delivered via clientelistic exchange” (Soledad Artiz Prillaman, 2020).

Prillaman’s observation corroborates what Basu argued in 2003 “Women’s movements are more likely to engage in democratic processes and achieve their objectives collectively if they both challenge and participate in state institutions” (Basu 2003).

Another program in India initiated by the Government called Education for Women’s Equality program, popularly known as the Mahila Samakhya program, was implemented in 1989 in multiple states over nearly two decades. One of the mechanisms that evolved from this program is the *Nari Adalat* or the Justice Courts.

Observations and available documents clearly indicate that the Nari Adalats have positively impacted the socio-political and family environment of women. It is also important to reiterate here that the success of the Nari Adalat is largely a consolidation of the Mahila Samakhya processes initiated at the grassroots level with the formation of the *sanghas*. It supports the feminist theory of building a critical mass of women within the community (Walker, 1990) who can challenge the oppressive norms, beliefs and attitudes of any community to affect social change (Agarwal and Hai, 2016).

Such government initiatives hold great promise even as there can be improvement in quality of the services provided. Partnerships with civil society organisation that these state program held for several years demonstrate that even in large state programs it is possible to embed formation of collectives that is responsive to challenges posed by discriminatory gender norms and promote accountability of various state institutions.

There is much greater evidence available from civil society initiatives in various countries of the global South that indicate the potential of collectives.

DAWN (1995) highlighted how social movements have adopted various mechanisms to make the state and its processes more transparent, participatory and accountable, while calling for the strengthening of countervailing institutions, like democratic legislative bodies, the judiciary, the media and the civil society, to ensure a balance of power (as cited in Silliman, 1999).

The report titled “World Survey on the Role of Women in Development” (2019) highlights micro-level initiatives from two South Indian states that aim to take advantage of the potential of collective action by transferring land to groups of landless women for farming purposes. The report finds that despite around 75% of rural women workers depending upon agriculture, compared to 59% of their male counterparts, initiatives to empower rural women rarely focus on farming. Telangana and Kerala launched two state-level pilot initiatives in the early 2000s to enable women to collectively lease land, pool their labour and capital and engage in joint cultivation on a voluntary basis; thus, offering them an opportunity to be recognised as farmers outside the domain of family farms, in which women are typically unpaid family workers with little autonomy. In Kerala, group farms generated five times higher profitability than individual farms, resulting in a significant difference in their incomes. However, in Telangana group farms were worse off in terms of annual productivity but better off in terms of annual net returns per farm. Women in Kerala performed better because of better socio-economic status and literacy levels, while the groups from Telangana were largely made up of older, often illiterate, economically disadvantaged Dalit women. In both cases, but especially in Telangana, women’s ability to participate in group farming was greatly affected by the availability of childcare services, underscoring the role of public services as a complement to asset-building initiatives. The success of each state also depended upon the level of government support provided (World Survey on the Role of Women in Development, 2019).

Desouza (2012) highlights the success of three women’s collectives — Bailancho Saad (*Women’s Voice*) in Goa, Saheli (*female friend*) in New Delhi and Forum Against Oppression of Women in Mumbai — in bringing about policy and political transformations through their campaigns. All three organisations

were motivated to challenge the oppression of women, rooted in patriarchal relationships and power structures, by building on a sisterhood of women with similar lived experiences. As a result of their work, all three organisations have been offered the opportunity to collaborate with and advise the government on relevant policy decisions. Desouza's (2012) work highlights how powerful women's collectives can pressure the state to fulfil its responsibilities and cater to the needs of its citizens. The UN's World Public Sector Report (2019) presents the case of the Slum Women's Initiative for Development (SWID) in Uganda that deals with the lack of land rights and implements transparency and accountability initiatives to improve service delivery and local governance processes through grassroots women's mobilisation and by monitoring and raising awareness of corruption in land titling processes. The collective receives seed funding and technical support from the Huairou Commission and UNDP's global program on anti-corruption. Its initial phase was implemented in Jinja (Uganda) in 2013 and aided 35 women in receiving land titles in less than 14 months. Women of the community organised themselves to visit local and district land offices and submitted their documents collectively to avoid paying bribes.

Tambiah in her paper that draws from various South Asian Countries, observes the role of civil society in engendering governance. She says, NGO networks focused on women's issues provide women with the opportunity to cultivate a collective social power to confront and negotiate with the state. Further, they often approach women's issues from an intersectional lens; for instance, by combining gender inequality with concerns of poverty, caste privilege and sectarianism (Tambiah, 2003). Instances from India highlight how NGOs can make elected women representatives more aware and decisive in their role. (Tambiah, 2003).

Area Networking and Development Initiatives, ANANDI for short, was started in 1995 by five young feminists to pursue the objectives of social justice, sustainable development and accountable governance by mobilising rural women and girls from marginalised communities in Gujarat. It has promoted the formation of various collectives. These collectives known as *sangathans* have been successful in holding the state liable for provisions under the public distribution system as well as for other rights owed to citizens, such as access to pensions, health services, governing bodies, employment under MGNREGA, land rights and financial credit, among a host of positive developments. With a large number of young women associating themselves with ANANDI, a variety of new and differing opinions have started to emerge, allowing women of all ages to question and learn from each other. By driving the foundation of several women's rights organisations, ANANDI has now gradually shifted towards information and strategic support, while the *sangathans* and other such groups focus on the ground-level work (Batliwala et al., 2022).

Observing the success of SHGs, PRADAN, along with Jagori, created a curriculum for SHGs to empower women with the knowledge and tools necessary to advocate for gender equality and their rights. With the help of a randomised control trial, Prillaman (2020) observed that this intervention enhanced women's political participation by fostering political discussions in primarily economic networks. These discussions awoke the realisation of shared interests rooted in gender-based discrimination and inspired collective action that demanded for improved delivery of public goods and services. Prillaman (2020) also cautions us against the co-optation of such informal institutions for political gain and for the representation of vested interests more innocuously for the representation of the interests of others.

Sharma and Sudarshan (2010) insist that to enable the effective participation of women in politics, we must not only analyse the characteristics and performance of elected women leaders but also the role of village communities in collectively demanding accountability from those elected. To support this argument, they present the experiences of women's participation in Whole Village Groups (WVGs), a network of around 450 women's groups spread across seven districts of Uttarakhand. To get a holistic view of the political participation and governance of women, we need to explore ways to strengthen the democratic and collective processes at the village level to increase engagement with the state machinery and generate accountability (Sharma & Sudarshan, 2010). WVGs have successfully achieved this to some extent and even secured active participation in formal governance institutions, like gram sabha

and panchayat activities. They have demanded accountability and effective services from government apparatus and functionaries, particularly in education and the functioning of primary schools. They have raised their demands by pressurising the state as a collective or even using openly confrontational and public forms of protest such as blocking traffic, street marches and campaigns outside local state institutions. WVGs' demands are not limited to the provision of effective services as recipients; in some cases, they have tried to influence the development agenda according to their needs and priorities and have succeeded to some extent. For instance, they challenged road construction in the region based on concerns that it adversely affects the productivity of farms and cuts through water sources.

Moreover, Sharma and Sudarshan (2010) find that women belonging to WVGs value their ability to speak publicly at meetings and with state officials, thereby, challenging "tradition" and "customary practices" that deny them access to public spaces.

Elson's work of the same year reinforces what Sharma and Sudarshan present through their empirical work – "that gender norms can be challenged during crises via deliberate collective action by civil society groups or governments to introduce new social practices and ideas". (Elson 2010)

Institute of Social Studies Trust³ an organisation based in India and committed to producing evidence around issues of women and work since 1980 consistently works with organisations and movements of the country and the region. It seeks to centre stage and address gendered dimensions of labour through a critical public-spirited inquiry through empirical research as well as community development programs. Some of their recent works also highlight the significance of being part of collectives from the point of women from marginalised sections.

A forthcoming study titled "**Digitalisation at the Frontlines: A Scoping Study of Experiences of ASHAs in Haryana**" captures the collective's role in building agency and voice among ASHAs (Accredited Social Health Animators – frontline health workers under the National Health Mission in India) through a quote from one of the ASHAs (*Disha, 29 Years Old from Jat community*): "*ability to say no is very powerful and we could gather this much courage because of the union only. Otherwise, we could not even speak in front of the Auxillary Nurse Midwife (another mostly female worker under the national health program). Now we can stand in front of the SMO (senior medical officer) and say anything without hesitation as we have that confidence now. We fight for our rights and we don't work without money*" (Sreerupa & Makkad, 2023).

The report observes that "the ASHA workers' trade union successfully opposed a state supported invasive surveillance app and showcased the strength and ingenuity of the ASHA collective in confronting detrimental digital data practices. Their actions have paved the way for envisioning new data futures founded on an inclusive and participatory approach, one that acknowledges and values the voices of those working tirelessly on the frontlines of the public healthcare system" (Sreerupa & Makkad 2023).

A longitudinal study, where ISST⁴ is the national partner, examines the backlash against the women's movements in South Asia. Presented below is an excerpt from the blog posts available on the project. On an event organised by the National Platform for Domestic Workers in association with coalition groups like Community for Social Change and Development (CSCD), Delhi for Domestic Workers Rights, and Voices held at Gandhi Peace Foundation, Delhi, on the occasion of International Day of Domestic workers, June 16th, the post states. "Domestic workers present at the event, took unpaid leave

³ ISST – Institute of Social Studies Trust holds ECOSOC status. <https://isstindia.org> The Authors work with this organisation.

⁴ Launched in January 2020, 'Sustaining Power: Women's Struggles against contemporary backlash in South Asia' (SuPWR) is a five-year ESRC-funded research project that aims to examine when, how, and why women's power struggles in Bangladesh, India, Nepal and Pakistan succeed in retaining power and sustaining their gains against backlash.

from work, planned for more meetings and events like this one. They vouched to mobilise and organise other domestic workers who are already not a part of the movement. Lastly, all the organisations adopted the strategy of advocating and pushing the government to address their demands for the inclusion of domestic workers in the minimum wage schedule, a legal framework for them, and a national registry. After all, only in unity do we stand, and at the conference all present vowed to stand by the rights of domestic workers – on this day and always" (Reja & Khumallabam, 2022). Blog post ["In unity we stand: Celebrating International Domestic Workers Day"](#)

Apart from making the state more accountable, as various authors have indicated, collectives have significant potential to address deep rooted beliefs about gender, religion, caste and ethnicity which act as a severe impediment to inclusive development.

In another the Blogpost from the same project: ["Countering hate speech in India with Interfaith Dialogue"](#) under the same project, ISST shares the thoughts of Noorjehan Safia Niaz, co-founder of the Bharatiya Muslim Mahila Andolan (BMMA). She expressed on 18 June 2022, a day to mark the inaugural International Day for Countering Hate Speech, "Some of us who belong to different faiths but bound together by our shared humanity got together on 28 April 2022 under the banner of Collective for Multi-Faith Dialogue. The purpose was to create platforms for all of us to come together to counter the wave of hatred... This is the first of many interfaith conversations and celebrations, and the collective intends to do many more in future to continue to counter the campaign of hate speech against Muslim people" (Niaz, 2022).

There is adequate evidence to indicate that collectivizing has significant impact for women whether it is to seek effective delivery of entitlements, improve responsiveness of state institutions, to promote participation of women in governance and to make institutions not just state but also family, community and markets more gender responsive.

At the CSW 68 more instances could come to the fore more many more countries and learn from one another and encourage nation states to invest in programs that promote collectives.

Challenges

Neo-liberal economic and welfare policies disproportionately impact women, reinforcing patriarchal structures and creating new forms of gender inequality. Building collectives and collective action using rights based and empowerment approaches that promote local leadership requires long term, systematic engagement.

Investments in such processes also need to be consistent and long term. Research by AWID that analyzed the budgets of feminist organisations using the database of the [Global Fund for Women](#) (GFW), one of the leading global feminist funds states, "Of the 3,739 feminist and women's rights organisations from the Global South that applied for funding with the GFW between 2015 and 2019, almost half of them (48%) operated on median annual budgets of \$30,000 or less. In 2013 the figure stood at \$20,000, indicating not much has changed. Only 6% of the groups have budgets over \$300,000 USD; and a mere 2% exceeds \$1M USD."

This study further states that between 2017-2018, women's rights organisations received only 0.13% out of the total Official Development Assistance - ODA; and only 0.4% of all gender-focused aid. ODA commitment for women's rights organisations has increased by only \$6M USD, from \$192M USD in 2013-2014 to \$198M USD in four years. Overall, ODA for gender equality as a primary objective has not changed nearly as much, staying stagnant at 4% of all gender focused aid for nearly 10 years. (AWID 2023)

Efforts of civil society organisations especially of women's rights organisations are critical to create the kind of alternatives mentioned in the section above. They are able to pilot initiatives that can be scaled

up through engagement with state departments and public funding.⁵ Supporting women's rights organisations is therefore critical.

There has been a growing recognition that the gender spectrum visualises gender as a continuum stretching from men to women and masculine to feminine. The feminist movement has expanded the discourse that seeks to include the rights of LGBTIQ+ individuals and communities. Yet progress on substantive policies and programs is slow. Collective action and strategies would be required to further their recognition and rights.

There is an increasing impatience with inefficiencies of the public sector institutions, which then turns towards seeking solutions through enhanced roles of the private sector. Traditional forms of wealth accumulation would have to be fundamentally altered to ensure that goals of social justice, removing systemic barriers are integral to creating alternative development models. The challenge is that women and marginalised communities are seen as a problem and not as a group or collective that is capable of being part of the solution.

The list of challenges can be much longer and deliberations at the CSW 68 can explore context specific challenges experienced by various actors.

Recommendations:

- i. For the marginalised section of women workers, gender based violence goes beyond the intimate partner violence and denial of rights as workers constitutes deep rooted structural violence experienced in their everyday struggle to survive.
- ii. There is an urgent need to amplify the benefits of strengthening collectives for achieving poverty eradication, ensuring state accountability and achieving gender equality.
- iii. Governments must set up systems which allows collectives particularly of marginalised and excluded communities to mediate access to entitlements or delivery of services at the last mile.
- iv. Systematic evidence building is required on how gender dynamics interplay with accountability, transparency and power structures.
- v. Increased funding for women's movements, women's rights organisations that focus on strengthening collectives that challenge gender discrimination, promote formal equality through affirmative action and progressive laws and empower women and girls including those that belong to non binary confirming gender identities through collective action.

⁵ ANANDI worked for nearly 10 years with the state and the national bodies implementing the Deendayal Upadhyay National Rural Livelihood Mission before the government announced the addition of Gender Justice Centres across the country. The resources for the program were raised through support from UNWomen, and philanthropic grants.

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