The Strength of Collective Processes: An 'Outcome Analysis' of Women's Collectives in India

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Abstract

Mainstream literature on organising usually assumes formal hierarchical structure, clear lines of reporting, supervision and well-defined rules as mandatory for efficiency and efficacy. Rigid rules could, however, negatively impact involvement, satisfaction, motivation and performance as they would not take into consideration the complexities of human behaviour. This article argues that collective or non-hierarchical organising empowers the individual participants involved in the process, but such organising experiments are rare and seldom documented. The article analyses a few women's collectives from around the country, particularly focusing on Bailancho Saad, in Goa, which turned 25 years old on 12 October 2011. It also draws on the experiences of Saheli in New Delhi and Forum in Mumbai, both of which are older. These organisations, ideologically opposed to hierarchy as well as patriarchal and dominating power structures, work for women through seemingly egalitarian processes and 'participatory' styles of functioning. In this article we look at some of the strengths of collective organising by analysing their outcomes.

Keywords

Collectives, women's organisations, women's movement, non-hierarchical organising, power, equality, empowerment

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The women's movement in India post the *Towards Equality* report (Committee on the Status of Women in India [hereafter CSWI], 1975) comprised varying kinds of organisations for women. Few women's organisations chose to function as collectives; Saheli in Delhi, Forum in Mumbai and Bailancho Saad in Goa are some such organisations ideologically committed to democratic functioning without a clear hierarchy. Most organisations are hierarchical in structure, and theories on organising (Desouza, 2009a) rarely discuss how organisational goals can be achieved through egalitarian processes, where control and accountability are the powers and duties of every individual and not just the authority of a few. This article highlights some of the strengths of collective processes drawn from the experiences of these three collectives.

Collective Energy

This discussion about the three collectives, Forum, Saheli and Bailancho Saad, brings into focus the fact that women often experience a level of comfort with this form of organising. Forum was the pioneer, followed by Saheli and then Bailancho Saad a few years later. While the organisations network with each other on certain issues, they are independent of each other in their routine functioning. The fact that these organisations have had similar organising experiences despite being located in three different states of India could provide useful examples for organisation within other movements as well.

It was violence against women that led to the formation of these collectives, which have located the cause of discrimination against women and their oppression in patriarchal relationships and power dynamics between the sexes. To a very large extent all three organisations have been successful in building up a resistance to diverse forms of oppression by using diverse strategies and forms of action. The collectives were built on a sisterhood of women with similar lived experiences and the belief that strength could be created in their unity.

While campaign work formed a major part of the agenda of all three organisations, service or outreach was seen to be an equally important component. However, voluntarism often poses hurdles in the path of collectives. For example, in long-term interventions, a sustained commitment

is difficult to obtain from volunteers, particularly when the period is not clearly definable. Collective ideology faces problems with both volunteers and paid staff, as all three organisations experienced. Another common experience was their celebration of independence, which led them to decline formal, institutional funding. They saw the organisation's autonomy linked to individual independence, freedom and justice.

Using Outcomes for Analysis

To analyse performance and the impact of collective organising, the 'outcomes' achieved by the organisations will be used. Tools used to measure success and efficiency in profit-oriented organisations may not be appropriate here as the aims and objectives of collectives differ from profit-oriented organisations, as do their expected outcomes or goals. Drawing from Staggenborg (1995), four categories of outcomes are presented: *(1)* political and policy outcomes, *(2)* cultural outcomes, *(3)* mobilisation outcomes and *(4)* personal or self-development outcomes. At times outcomes may overlap as the aims of women's organisations are multiple and their impacts are often linked. One type of success may also have a bearing on another type, and outcomes occurring at one point in time might also affect future outcomes.

Political and Policy Outcomes

Political and policy outcomes include an organisation's success in getting its demands on the political agenda of the state and new policies implemented as well as transforming existing political structures.

The mid-1980s campaign by Bailancho Saad (henceforth Saad) against the use of pre-natal diagnostic tests resulted, in April 1989, in the introduction and passing of the Regulation of the Use of Pre-Natal Diagnostic Techniques Bill in the Goa Assembly (Ravindra, 1991). Saad also succeeded in getting the Dowry Prohibition Act of 1961 extended to Goa (Borges, 2000, p. 448) and its campaign for the early disposal of rape cases resulted in the Chief Justice of the Bombay High Court issuing directions in April 1994 to the district and sessions judges of North

and South Goa to dispose of all rape trials in their respective courts as expeditiously as possible. This in turn led to courts giving rape cases 'priority' treatment. In 1994, Saad was successful in freeing 31 women from Tamil Nadu who were bonded labourers at a food processing unit in Goa. This incident put an end to the illegal practice of bonded labour in several factories in Goa. With regard to eviction of women from their marital homes by husbands or in-laws, Saad managed to get the Director of Prosecution to put in place procedures for a woman to exercise her right to the matrimonial home and to re-entry in cases where she had left it. Denial of the woman's right to enter the matrimonial home is now seen as a criminal offence under Section 341 of the Indian Penal Code, a cognisable offence, and can also attract a civil case such as for divorce, separation and maintenance.

Saad, despite being a non-registered, non-funded organisation, has been nominated to several formal advisory bodies and policy drafting committees of the state government. It has been part of the coordinating team managing the special cell set up in 1993 to deal with crimes against women, for which members were appointed to the drafting committee of the Goa State Commission for Women Bill. Subsequently, in the year 2000, a member of Saad was appointed to the Goa State Commission for Women for a three-year term, and reappointed in 2003 for the next three years. The collective was also invited to be a member of the advisory committee formed by the Directorate of Social Welfare to tackle the issue of child abuse in Goa. Saad has been on the planning committee for the formulation of the Children's Act 2003. More recently, in 2008, Saad was asked to be on the screening committee for the Stree Shakti Puruskar awarded by the Directorate of Women and Child Welfare, Government of Goa. In 2009, at the request of the Department of Planning, a member of Saad joined the team from Goa that visited Kerala on the issue of district planning and was then appointed to the committee formed to give decentralised planning a boost in Goa.

Moving over to Mumbai, we find one of the most successful campaigns in the country was the one against rape initiated by a collective called the Forum Against Rape, which started in the year 1979 and was later renamed the Forum Against the Oppression of Women (FAOW; henceforth Forum). Forum's successes include inculcating the importance of concealing the identity of a rape victim in media reports and obtaining of a victim's consent before initiating a case. Alongside, an

amendment to the rape law shifted, in custodial rape cases, the onus of proof of consent from the prosecution to the accused. Forum's focus later shifted from law amendment to amendment of the procedures for handling cases of rape, and its demands for speedy rape trials, procedures that would not humiliate the victim, the recognition of marital rape, tackling of the social stigma that accompanies rape and, most importantly, support to the victims, regardless of class, caste or age, have met with great success. The change in the attitudes of the police, service providers, press and judiciary in cases of rape and their treatment of rape victims has changed over the last two decades, largely due to the contribution of Forum.

Saheli of Delhi, one of India's pioneer women's activist collectives, took up the challenge of tackling the complex issue of domestic violence at a time when the majority viewed it as a 'private' matter undeserving of outside intervention. Saheli mounted a concerted campaign against such attitudes, apart from extending support services to individual victims. Saheli's efforts bore fruit in the law now in existence, the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act 2005, which recognises the importance of the issue of domestic violence. When the organisation became deeply involved in relief work after the Delhi riots of 1984, the central government proposed that Saheli start a training centre for the riot victims, and the Ministry of Human Resource Development even offered to collaborate with the organisation for the printing and distribution of posters highlighting the oppression of women. Saheli's work against hazardous contraceptives and its demand for 'informed consent' as well as the enforcement of ethical guidelines for contraceptive trials compelled the Indian Council for Medical Research to revise its guidelines in 2000: the 'notion of accountability and individual patient's rights has begun to be accepted, albeit reluctantly' (Saheli, 2006, p. 51).

The political and policy outcomes of collective organising depend on:

(a) the mass multi-sectoral support that the organisation has built. Mobilisation requires resources and is therefore not easy for new collectives.
(b) the reputation the organisation has within society and its credibility in the community, both developed over time, but are very important. It does not matter if the organisation takes a stand that is contradictory to mainstream opinion, but it should be able to

show that other benefits have accrued to society through its intervention.

(c) persistence despite opposition from sections of the population. With fluctuating membership, all collectives find it hard to sustain an effort over long periods. As a result, issues that seem urgent at one point of time may, if unsuccessful, get set aside because of the difficulty in sustaining the campaign. The political outcomes of collective organising can bring about substantive changes that affect all of society.

Cultural Outcomes

Cultural outcomes include changes in social norms and public behaviour and ideas that extend beyond the beneficiaries of the movement. This refers to the success of the organisation in reaching out not only to women but to society at large. Bringing about attitudinal change is vital for women's empowerment, as gender equality in any society cannot come about without a change in the patriarchal mindset. Certain practices that are gender discriminatory are so entrenched in society that they are often justified as 'tradition'. An understanding of the difficulties faced in bringing about change in this area makes one even more appreciative of the success achieved by women's collectives.

In Goa, in the late 1980s and early 1990s, when Saad was establishing itself, the 'new' ideology of gender equality was cause for some unrest in society. The larger community needed time to accept this new culture, where women were demanding equal opportunity and status. It was perceived as a threat not only to the man's role, but to the very structure of the family as well. Initially, as the members of Saad were mostly students, society regarded the women's collective as a man-hating group of unmarried women that would cause the destruction of harmonious relationships within families. It was deemed to be only a protest group at constant loggerheads with the government. Today, Saad is synonymous with women's rights and one of its founder members was nominated for the Woman of the Year Award 2011.

This change in societal response is due to several reasons, not least among them being *(a)* the fact that the organisation has stood the test of time and proved to be of assistance to a large number of women from

different sections of the Goan populace and *(b)* the current membership of the collective no longer comprises only unmarried students but also lawyers, teachers, journalists, women in business, academicians and 'grandmothers'. The more positive response from society to Saad's work has also impacted the collective's membership positively. Opposition and negative propaganda in the press initially limited the number of members to a few, but now that there is less resistance to it the collective is larger, as is evident in the attendance at the Women's Day programmes every year.

In its first decade Saad often had to battle the police, but attitudes have changed towards the organisation. Saad has conducted gender sensitisation programmes for police personnel since 2001 at the invitation of the Police Department. In November 2008, Saad was invited by the Police Department to be on its Committee for the Prevention of Sexual Harassment of Women at the Workplace. A significant change in the attitude of the male community towards Saad is symbolised by the fact that today, on the paid staff of Saad, are two men proud to say that they are working for Saad and for women's empowerment in particular. The earlier 'anti-male', 'western', 'family-breaking' labels have been shed.

Forum's Surname Campaign took a stand against the custom of women adopting the husband's name after marriage and of children adopting their father's. The organisation felt that this excluded mothers, the natural guardians of children. The campaign has met with some success as now, in many schools, the mother's name is included in application forms, and a child's passport today respects the names of both the father and the mother and does not require their surnames to be the same. The Surname Campaign also resulted in the Reserve Bank of India issuing instructions to banks to permit women, even if they retained their maiden name, to operate the bank accounts of their children as their natural guardians.

Like Saad, Saheli went through a period when it was seen by society as responsible for the breaking up of home and family with its radical politics and its hard stand against violence against women. However, seeing that it impacted positively on the lives of countless women, society began to acknowledge Saheli's work, which was dedicated to the cause of women's empowerment.

The success of collective processes on cultural outcomes depends greatly on the composition of the group and its ability to uphold the

participatory method. Very often, especially in the process of organising programmes with a particular target in focus, spending time on group discussions and debating different points of view may be seen as less important. However, this aspect of collective organising is crucial for any change in attitude. It is also the case during awareness programmes. Sufficient time has to be given to discussions of the opposing points of view as well.

One of the lessons from Saad's experience is that an open membership policy facilitates debate between extreme points of view, as does the varied composition of a group in sharing ideas across cultures. The cultural change that is sought here is not merely in the social customs and traditions discriminatory to women, but also in the attitudes and ideologies that perpetuate women's subordination and oppression. It is not only important to work with different groups and organisations on a variety of issues, but also to organise programmes for a variety of audiences and encourage participants from different sections of the society. Sometimes a women's organisation needs to include men, too!

Mobilisation Outcomes

'Mobilisation outcomes' refers to an organisation's success in activating a pool of people who can be drawn into subsequent movements (Staggenborg, 1995); in other words, it means success in creating a 'collective consciousness' to create resources for future mobilisation. The term also refers to the extent of the organisation's outreach and the geographical spread of its goals and ideals. It speaks of the continuity of the work of the organisation, whether under the banner of the organisation itself or due to the inspiration it has given to other groups or movements, even if the issues taken up by these groups or movements are not directly related to the primary organisation's agenda.

Saad has stood the test of time and continues till this day. Its reputation as an organisation doing credible work for the betterment of women in Goa is so widespread that most organisations, not only women's groups, seek to collaborate with Bailancho Saad on a wide range of issues, which include AAAG (Aam Aadmi Aurat Against Gambling) against casinos in Goa, CICH (Citizens Initiative for Communal Harmony), Goa State

Commission for Women, Goa Bachao Andolan, Goa Mahila Shakti Abhiyan, to name just a few. The attendance each year at the 8 March public programmes to commemorate International Women's Day is documentary evidence of Saad's mobilisation capability.

Collaborating on issues of common interest with women's groups spanning the state and the country, as well as with international organisations, has helped Saad build a wide and strong network and also lends more force to its campaigns. In the first few years of Saad's existence it was known as a city-based group of urban, educated and mostly unmarried women, but its composition is now more varied, with women from differing religious and social groups as well as levels of literacy and education, and belonging to both the rural and the urban areas of Goa's north and south districts (Desouza, 2009b). This changed membership profile has resulted from the organisation's deliberate strategy to reach out to people in the villages as well as naturally from the reputation it has earned within society for its work on the welfare and empowerment of women. Attendance at the weekly Saturday meeting at Saad's office is not an indicator of the organisation's growth as Saad has always worked out of a small space, a small core group meeting regularly while the rest of the members keep in touch by their participation in campaigns, meetings and other programmes. They contact the group on Saturday only when in need of assistance or support for either a personal issue or with reference to a case. The real proof of the outreach of the organisation is the Goa-wide spread of its values and ideology, the growing radius of the area from which people contact Saad, and the number of people who attend the 8 March and other programmes.

As already mentioned, this growth has been the incidental outcome of the organisation's processes as well as due to deliberate efforts. While there has been a growth in terms of those who consider themselves members, there has also been greater growth in terms of Saad's outreach and in the nature of its activities and programmes. Several older members have used their experience with Saad to work for other NGOs, or set up their own, or undertaken initiatives on issues such as communalism, anti-tourism and children's rights, which are separate but not disconnected from Saad's agenda, and have thereby spread the ripples of Saad's activism into other movements. Apart from the mobilisation strength of individual members, the group has extended its outreach by organising programmes throughout the state with a focus on rural Goa.

The success of Forum's campaign against rape and the impact it had on the birth of new organisations, including the movement for gay rights, is testimony of the mobilisation outcome of the collective experience. Many of Forum's members were involved in the organisation of Queer Azadi, the gay parades held in Mumbai in 2008 and 2009. This testifies to the fact that one of the strengths of such collective organising is the possibility of the activation of a pool of people who can be drawn into subsequent movements as collective organising encourages the development of critical thinking and social action for change.

Saheli, being one of the first women's activist organisations of its kind in India, has had many women come and go, either as part of its active core group or receiving its support. Whatever the motivation for associating with the organisation, the exercise *On being a Saheli* learned that 'Once a Saheli, always a Saheli'. When asked why they had left the organisation, the response of even those who had not regularly attended meetings or programmes was 'Who said I've left Saheli?' (Saheli, 2006, p. 75). As in the case of Saad, the outcome of its process and ideology is that the organisation invariably gets so well assimilated into the lives of its members that, even if they move elsewhere, they carry with them its collective energy. Saheli has touched the lives of countless women and has impacted other social movements as well.

We have already discussed that much of the success of collective organising stems from a mass support for the organisation and its ability to mobilise large multi-sectoral support for its campaigns. Successful mobilisation depends on several factors associated with a certain familiarity with the population to be mobilised, an expertise on the issue for which people are being mobilised, the personal charisma and language and communication skills of the mobiliser and the reputation of the mobilising organisation. Not all members of an organisation are gifted with the special attributes required for mobilising people and it is difficult for one individual to have them all. It is, therefore, important for the group as a whole to identify the individual/s with the necessary skills for this aspect of the organisation's work.

It is important that the organisation be aware of its own mobilisation strengths. Often, collaborations on issues are sought by new groups with the purpose of leaning on the existing support base of an older, more established group. Occasionally, collaborations are sought by groups that do not share the same ideology. The ideal position for mobilisation

is when organisations maintain a level of transparency and the reasons for the collaboration and the benefits are clear and known.

Personal or Self-development Outcomes

'Personal or self-development outcomes' refers to the success of the organisation in enhancing the lives of its members. It refers to the empowering impact of the participatory method on individual members. Empowering the lives of individual women is important for change, as it reciprocally impacts the success of the collective in meeting its goal of establishing a force that can bring about a more gender-just society. It is only when women are empowered with the freedom to participate in decision making and knowledge of their rights that they begin to make changes in their own lives and subsequently spread the ideology of gender justice to others.

In the routine functioning of Saad, the strategies to promote democracy and participation as well as the incorporation of women-friendly practices make the organisation less intimidating to women (Desouza, 1998). There is no demand for regular attendance, participation is encouraged in discussions and the concerns of the group are explained in a language best understood by the majority, all contributing towards giving new members an immediate sense of belonging and acceptance, which encourages their participation. Encouraging participation and involvement of even new members strengthens group solidarity and results in shared responsibilities for decisions taken collectively. Several new members have expressed their appreciation for the Saad meetings even when they are unable to articulate the difference between these meetings and others that they have attended. They say that Saad's meetings are 'different', that they 'like being part of the group', that they feel comfortable and 'strong'.

The members from varying backgrounds, with varying levels of education, associate with the group for varying reasons. Some leave Saad because they are transferred out of the state (though they may continue to stay in touch with the organisation), or because they have got involved with other organisations, or because of personal differences with the group or individual members, or because the purpose for which they had become involved has been met (especially as in instances of women who

seek assistance from Saad or students researchers seeking information for projects). Diversity has brought different levels of commitment, and sustaining commitment is not easy. Differences exist also in terms of skills, capabilities and opinions. At Saad there is a conscious attempt to reduce these inequalities and neutralise differences by the dissemination of information, the sharing of tasks and the learning of new skills. Differences in opinion have been tackled by discussion and viewing the issue from all possible angles.

Although the collective lays no demand on individual members to contribute, there is an underlying belief that everyone can learn new skills while simultaneously acknowledging that there are certain jobs that some persons just cannot do. The legal aspect of cases, for example, is handled solely by a trained lawyer, a member of the organisation. A trained counsellor plays the lead role in cases that require such expertise. Some members may help out with home visits, support, protection and other needs of the case. Yet others provide moral support to the concerned person. Everyone plays a role defined by her capabilities.

Saad has organised formal group dynamics and team-building programmes to bridge the differences that might exist between individuals. They build group solidarity, facilitate individual self-development and personality building and encourage introspection.

Consensus forms an important part of Saad's functioning. This does not imply 'compromise' or 'voting', but that all members present when a decision is to be taken have the opportunity to discuss the issues concerned and that a decision can be reached that is acceptable to all. This process does not discourage dissent. If no consensus is reached, Saad does not take a stand on that particular issue.

Consensus poses problems of its own, such as delayed decisions, which can affect certain activities more than others. Urgent decisions are often needed, for example, when handling cases. In such instances, the individual or group handling each case arrives at decisions independently, but at the next meeting reports the progress of the case to the larger group. Thus, 'temporary specialists' for particular activities and 'modified consensuses' were introduced, which means that 'critical decisions are reserved for the entire membership, while routine decisions are delegated horizontally' (Iannello, 1992, p. 95). The position of 'specialist' is temporary, volunteered and acknowledged by the group. This volunteered responsibility, resulting from a sense of commitment, leads to

personal accountability for the task undertaken. Leadership and direction in the form of temporary specialists constantly change hands, resulting in multiple, diverse, as well as adaptive responses to the same issues.

Just supporting the value for equality within the collective does not imply that equality always exists and that all members participating will also value equality. Much depends on the ability to negotiate differences between participating individuals. Differences in skills and knowledge, for example, will always exist and are often more difficult to deal with than differences in socio-economic status, which may not necessarily have a bearing on the actual working of the group. Sharing of skills and the rotation of tasks are often strategies used to counter the differences in skills, but this is easier said than done. In sensitive case handling, for example, a person who lacks basic communication skills can do great harm. This was more of a concern in the early years of Saad than it is today because then the reputation of the organisation was tied up with the way work was discharged. Cases that were not handled well could harm an already vulnerable organisation that was being publicly criticised. Today, however, the organisation's reputation is not vulnerable, it has earned a standing in society for the work it has been doing and it is able to run the risk of new members handling cases. These new members then report back to the group and mistakes are discussed to avoid their repetition.

Since consensus forms the basis of the organisation's decision making, much is dependent on individual verbal skills and confidence to articulate opinion. This is a major limitation to equal participation. Over the years, confidence has been built by entrusting the individual with responsibilities, such as a public sharing of experiences, to enable her to voice an opinion despite her lack of fluency. Another strategy employed is to speak in the language of the majority and provide translations. The view is that more articulate members must curb the urge to voice their opinions all the time and an effort should be made to make sense of the opinions of the less articulate members. This is made possible with the cherished value that everyone has something to offer. Equality of respect for others is one of the strengths of collective organising.

It is the responsibility of those in so-called 'advantageous' positions to recognise differences but also act as equalisers. Such an enabling role will be carried out only to the extent of the individual's commitment to equality. Older members become automatic leaders as their familiarity with the values of the organisation is greater. Therefore, one can say that

the learning of new tasks in the collective is not only for those who lack skills and knowledge in terms of formal training, but even 'enablers' need to learn to handle the process appropriately by, for example, being less critical. One can also say that the process of minimising differences in skills places demands on all participants. However, as Helen Brown (1992, p. 19) has warned, this might lead to 'levelling down' rather than a 'levelling up' resulting in an overall deficiency of skills.

Within the collective, it is claimed that all members have the right to identify problems and to suggest solutions. However, the reality is a lot more complicated as ensuring equality of influence in decision-making is a complex issue. According to Rothschild-Whitt (1982, pp. 44–45), individual differences in influence inevitably limit what can be achieved in the pursuit of equality:

> Inequalities of influence persist in the most egalitarian of organisations… Such individual differences may constrain the organisation's ability to real-ize its egalitarian ideals. The task of any collectivist-democratic workplace … is to eliminate all bases of individual power and authority save those that individuals carry in their person.

Mansbridge (1973, p. 361), on the other hand, says that 'each group must … understand and find ways to deal with inequalities that cannot be reduced'.

While discussing the possibilities of formulating strategies to equalise influence, it may be pertinent to note some extremist positions such as that of J. Freeman (1984) who talks of the 'tyranny of structurelessness' in organisations such as those within the autonomous women's move-ment. According to Freeman, structurelessness is a myth and only con-ceals the informal structure within which elite members or 'stars' are able to wield unchallenged and unchallengeable power within the organ-isation. Be it a myth or a utopia, Bailancho Saad stubbornly believes that it is worth striving for!

Forum's and Saheli's experiences were similar to Saad's. Forum (1990, p. 4), reflecting on an attempt to provide women security from sexual abuse in train compartments after 8 p.m., stated that:

> We would 'guard' twice a week, boarding the Virar fast train at Dadar and change the train at Andheri so as to make our presence felt in two different

> trains each time. We kept varying the timings between 8 and 10 p.m. because we found that men began to avoid the train we guarded. We would make sure that we were at least 12 of us. However as days passed, many women commuters began to join us. We carried on this action for a month. On two occasions, Forum women who were travelling individually on days when the campaign was not on were beaten up by men who recognised their faces. So we felt that we better proceed to the next stage of holding a joint meeting with railway and police authorities.

Looking back on this campaign, the organisation described the guarding of the compartments as 'tiresome and dangerous' and yet 'the most rewarding': 'Individually, we have successfully fought against our fear of travelling alone late in the night' (Forum, 1990, p. 3). The collective assertion of rights resulted in individual empowerment through strength gained from the lived experience.

The collective processes adopted by Saheli too have helped the group grow and develop its understanding of issues as well as its positions on some of the issues. 'Saheli shaped me up. And I am still in that shape' (Divya, quoted in Saheli, 2006, p. 75). Ashima, Saheli's first ever 'case', is quoted in *25 years of Continuity—and Change* (Saheli, 2006, p. 11): 'I will never forget my first day in Saheli. Each one of them made me feel as if I had grown a couple of support pillars around me reaching out to help me'. Malika says, 'I remember the deep sense of relief and "de-alienation" as a young woman to find a common voice and to be able to work on issues that seemed so integral to my growing consciousness' (Ibid., p. 75). The practice of rotating the post of coordinator in particular, gave individuals the chance to experience leadership, even though it was forced onto members at times (Ibid., p. 93).

Some Lessons from Collective Organising

A few lessons from collective organising, obtained from discussions with participants of the three collectives, are listed below. The principles drawn from their experiments are divided broadly into *(1)* collective ideology, *(2)* participation and *(3)* accountability—the three most important ingredients for the success of a collective organisation. However, this list is not conclusive.

1. **Collective ideology**

    (a) A set of core values, identified by the group, gives direction to the organisation's activities. The core values then also ensure that the organisation's ideology is maintained.

    (b) The adoption of a holistic approach, wherein individuals that make up the organisation are considered as important as the organisation itself, helps to strengthen the collective bond, spread the collective spirit and enable collective functioning.

    (c) In collective organising, the individual and the group are inter-related and as a result, every individual is important for the group. Team building, therefore, is an important component of collective organising. A focus on team-building exercises *(i)* helps in building bonds between members, *(ii)* allows members to become familiar with the background and ideology of all members, *(iii)* tackles differences of opinion, personality clashes and other interpersonal conflicts that may arise and *(iv)* allows members to locate and articulate their own needs within the larger goals of the organisation. This strengthens loyalty, solidarity and commitment. Team-building workshops may be planned as frequently as once every three months. However, if the schedule is not fixed in advance, there is the likelihood of such workshops being relegated to a backseat with the organisation's preoccupation with its routine functions.

2. **Participation**

    (a) Participation is largely dependent on the skills and experience of members. Therefore, participation is enhanced within the organisation by providing members with opportunities for self-development through training, which would include human relations, skills development and experience with multiple tasks.

    (b) Handling certain tasks requires specialised skills, knowledge and sensitivity. For example, a person who lacks basic communication skills can do great harm if handling a sensitive case. While training can help bridge many barriers, the organisation's awareness of individual capabilities, talents and limitations, as well as the individual's awareness of the same, contributes to the smooth functioning of the organisation.

(c) Regular weekly discussions of members' work keeps the group informed of areas that need intervention and allows for feedback and remedial action, if necessary.

(d) To achieve change, all organisations need to keep cons-tantly abreast of the current socio-political and economic scenario, whether local, national or global and therefore, building networks amongst themselves is fundamental to their work.

(e) For the success of collective organising, it is important for individual members to encourage innovation and be flexible and adaptive in their response to issues. There can be no one best way to tackle all issues. As each issue is dependent on the current/local circumstances, a strategy that was successful in period X may not necessarily be the appropriate strategy in period Y. Each situation has to be assessed and a plan formu-lated accordingly. Rigid conformity to rules can be a hurdle to innovative planning.

(f) Decisions by consensus are time consuming and meetings that eat into leisure time or the personal time of the individual members can discourage participation. At each meeting, lots may be drawn for a time keeper who also ensures that routine meetings end within a specific time, though this may not be always possible as, for example, before programmes or major campaigns.

(g) Encouraging discussions on issues such as the caste system, the dominance of a social class, the stereotyping of women and other issues concerning equality (or gender, class or caste) enables the critique of conservative ideas and helps remove fundamental roadblocks to collective organising.

(h) A collective is based on respect for the capabilities of indi-viduals within that collective. When members achieve short-term goals they are encouraged to aspire for longer-term goals while upholding the value of equality. However, just support-ing the value of equality within a collective does not imply that equality always exists, nor does it imply that all partici-pating members will also value equality. Negotiating differ-ences between the participating individuals is key to a collective's success.

(i) Encouraging dissent enriches the process of consensus decision-making and helps in the acceptance of individual differences in opinion.

(j) Occasionally, some participants may not share in certain values of the organisation. Negotiating such differences to arrive at a workable situation ensures that they will not pose a hurdle to the organisation's style.

3. Accountability

(a) When meetings are held to discuss the tasks to be undertaken in the following week and to clarify what, why, when, how and by whom, the sharing of responsibility is encouraged and accountability ensured. It fosters agreement regarding goals and the means to achieve them.

(b) Leaders or 'temporary specialists' emerge within collectives, and their temporal tenure is important. Their authority results from an ability to motivate others, judiciously integrate the initiatives and efforts of the group and coordinate the organisation's endeavours, rather than from a hierarchical position.

(c) A system of reward or acknowledgement of individual contributions to the organisation on a continuous or at least a yearly basis encourages accountability. For dedicated service, reassurance in terms of rewards, even if it is in the nature of a felicitation by the group, goes a long way in encouraging and ensuring participation and accountability.

Women's organisations such as Saad, Saheli and Forum have been the chief practitioners of the 'participatory democratic' mode of social movement organisation with their feminist goals of fostering democratic and caring processes that empower the participants. Empowerment today is the catch word in all initiatives for women be they government, semi-government or non-government. Yet, the most empowering of strategies, namely non-hierarchical processes, are rarely considered important. Even today, programmes for women largely see women as 'beneficiaries' rather than agents of change. It is time that we take a serious view of the personal/self-development component in programmes for women, as this outcome has far-reaching consequences, which, as mentioned earlier, impact all other outcomes. We cannot hope for empowerment if we

cannot give women a chance to experience what empowerment truly means. There is hope for the empowerment of women if they are equal partners in a democratic process.

If 'collective action' is short-lived, it has, even in its temporary period, the capacity to act as a centre for a vibrant social movement community and will most definitely impact on later feminist collective action in several ways. However, we have seen that when short-term goals are achieved, collective action does not cease but, in fact, inspires the group to pursue other goals with the vigour and confidence obtained from earlier work experience. It might help develop a pool of activists who participate in other existing organisations or create models for collective action that could potentially influence other groups. Therefore, even if a feminist organisation has exerted little direct influence on public policy and has not accomplished its radical goals, it can be seen as effective, efficient and successful if its mobilisation, broader cultural and personal or self-development outcomes are taken into consideration. These results are important and their value needs to be recognised.

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