CHAPTER TEN

CONCLUSION:
Lessons from Women’s Collective Organising

…Imagine there's no countries
   It isn't hard to do
   Nothing to kill or die for
   And no religion too
   Imagine all the people
   Living life in peace…

You may say that I'm a dreamer
   But I'm not the only one
   I hope someday you'll join us
   And the world will be as one

– from a song by John Lennon titled Imagine

The search or dream for an alternative social organisation that would eliminate conflict and establish a ‘perfect’ society for all has existed throughout the history of humankind. Plato envisioned a ‘Republic’, Skinner a ‘utopian community’, and Marx hoped for a stateless and classless society. The list of socialist, reformist and revolutionary thinkers and organisations is long and includes on it, Bailancho Saad in Goa, which is ideologically committed to ‘non-hierarchy’, aspiring to this day to achieve a gender equal society through organising collectively for change. Bailancho Saad’s dream has been an uphill struggle for the collective, but the many small victories on the way has kept the organisation working towards this dream.

It was important to undertake this study of the experience with democratic organising, as there is not much academic work done in terms of documenting such exercises, particularly women’s experiments with collective organising for empowerment. Yet, a major role is played by such organisations towards social transformation (Jayaram 2009). N. Jayaram (2005: 16) has also argued that ‘civil society is fundamental to democratic governance’, which re-establishes the importance of documenting experiments, such as that of Bailancho Saad. There is, as we have seen in Chapter 1, a large body of literature on the politics of gender, accounts of women’s
experience of gender discrimination, stereotyping, and manifestations of patriarchal domination, that have almost compelled feminist thinking to align itself with democratic principles of organisation and to work towards the building of a democratic community.

We also saw from the theories discussed in Chapter 2 that literature on organisations and organising has largely focused on systems adopting various levels of bureaucratic structure, and has been based on approaches that recommend formal, hierarchical organisation designs to meet the desired outcomes. But,

In bureaucracies unity of command and centralization of decision making are based on a very simplified and one-sided understanding of the nature of power, as free from moral responsibility, oriented towards manipulation, reduced mostly to coercion, sanctified by the priority of institutional good over humanitarian concerns … Standardization of role performance fractionates human responsibility, weakens the internal cohesion and identity of individuals and groups as natural elementary parts of social systems, and creates the illusion of ‘order’, ‘rationality’, and ‘coordination’ in which the socio-moral and cultural factors are omitted (Mateijko 1987: 247).

Bureaucratic organisations may have served their purpose during their historical beginnings when there was a need to replace organisations that were totally based on tribal, community or familial frameworks. But, given today’s context, ‘with the progressing diversification of tasks, changing ratio of staff to line personnel, the improvement of communication up the line, transformation of authority relationships, decentralization and general relaxation of rules have become a necessity that makes the bureaucratic pyramid obsolete’ (ibid.: 291), it is time we looked for an alternative to bureaucracy and drew lessons in this regard from feminist organising.

A Google search on ‘organising for empowerment’ will lead one to a host of recent corporate management terms such as ‘inverted pyramid’, ‘democratisation of organisation’, ‘reverse accountability’, ‘enabling environment’ and ‘lattice organisation’. While these terms are hypothetical to corporate houses, they are lived experiences and practices of feminist organisations within the women’s movement. This study has highlighted the contribution of women’s collective organising on the principles of democratic functioning and empowerment of women.

The feminist case against bureaucracy has argued that bureaucratic structures are inherently patriarchal and to ‘challenge bureaucracy in the name of the values and goals
of feminist discourse is to undermine the chain of command, equalize the participants, subvert the monopoly of information and secrecy of decision making, and essentially… democratize the organisation’ (Ferguson 1984: 208-209). Chapter 3 has offered a detailed gender critique of conventional social science theory in general and organisation theory in particular.

Today, no doubt, the seeds of the idea of participatory or collaborative management has been sown, but, by and large, the presumption about formal organisations being more efficient, and therefore, more successful, is far more pervasive. This is despite the often faced challenge of managing the performance of a diverse workforce and the frequent threats to management from trade unions, worker uprisings and revolts against authoritarianism. While organisations are constantly trying to develop strategies to increase individual motivation, commitment, development and fulfilment, to increase productivity and to better the achievement of organisation goals, these strategies are largely remedial rather than preventative.

In Chapter 4, while mapping the women’s movement in India, we have highlighted the collective strength of a movement and its achievements in changing the status of women. One such success for the women’s movement was the change that the country’s population policy has undergone, which has been an outcome of the forceful demands of the women’s movement in India. For example, till the 1990s, India’s health policy was narrowly focused on family planning and control of fertility. It was characterized by a preoccupation with contraceptive targets, incentives and disincentives. After 1994, however, following women’s protests made even at the International Conference on Population and Development held in Cairo, the Government of India altered its approach and today has projected a focus on ‘meeting women’s needs’ and ‘quality health care’.

The feminist ideology is a ‘radical’ one, one that poses fundamental challenges to existing systems of power relations. One such challenge is its resistance to hierarchical organisational structure. Most feminist organisations function with a decided policy to organize as a ‘collective’ and a stated opposition to hierarchical structures which they view as dominating and patriarchal. Collective organising, therefore, forms the basis of the organisation culture in most feminist organisations, as it is one of the strictly
unchangeable principles of organisation. Feminist collective organising contradicts the views of J. Freeman (1984), who talks of the ‘tyranny of structurelessness’ in organisations such as those within the autonomous women’s movement. According to Freeman, collective organising is a myth and that it only conceals the informal structure within which elite members or ‘stars’ are able to wield unchallenged and unchallengeable power within the organisation. On the contrary, as we have seen through Chapters 5, 6, 7, 8 and 9, organising collectively is a powerful political strategy based on a value for equality.

Within Bailancho Saad, the women’s collective in Goa, the non-hierarchical style of functioning is upheld almost with the status of an organisational goal and ‘opposition to hierarchy’ as well as commitment to work for the betterment of the position of women are part of their collective ideology. Decisions are taken collectively through a process of consensus and this process is integral to the organisation’s functioning, and is viewed as a conscious step towards equality. Participants present at meetings are informed about important issues to be discussed, as well as the opposing views on those issues. It is only after detailed discussions and debates that an attempt is made to arrive at a consensus. Consensus, within the collective, does not imply ‘compromise’ or ‘voting’. It means that all members of the organisation present when the decision is taken have had the opportunity to discuss the issues concerned, until a decision that is acceptable to everyone is arrived at. This process does not discourage dissent. If no consensus is reached, the organisation does not take a stand on that particular issue. This method ensures that no single person or fixed group of persons dominate the decisions taken. Specialists or co-ordinators do emerge, but only temporarily and for specific tasks.

In recent organisation development literature (see Lewis and Kanji 2009), participatory decision making has been explained as the ideal intervention for practice. We have seen in Chapter 8 that the collective value of equality through participatory decision-making, disseminating information, and promoting free and informed choices, has boosted member’s personal commitment to the organisation decisions and resulted in varied outcomes – political, cultural or social, mobilisation and personal or self-development outcomes. In that Chapter and in Chapter 6 we have already looked at some of the limitations or hurdles to be crossed. Limitations such as limited funds due to the
organisations policy against certain funding sources, particularly large institutional funding, or funding from organisations that violate women’s rights, has already been discussed. We saw how monies from such sources are not accepted as they might control the organisation’s agenda or mean acceptance of the organisation’s activities. Some other limitations that pose a serious threat to collective organising are discussed below.

10.1. Participant Related Limitations

10.1.1. Participant’s Background and Experience

One of the limitations of a women’s activist organisation is that it may not adequately represent women from all sections of society – social, religious, economic, etc. This study has shown that most issues taken up by such organisations are those that have emerged from the lived experiences of its participants. Therefore, the limited representation of the society within the organisation’s composition might also then limit the concerns taken up by the organisation.

10.1.2. Participant’s Orientation to Ideology

As collective organising is largely ideologically driven, the participant’s allegiance to egalitarian politics plays a major role in the adoption of democratic processes in day to day organising. Participants who desire to lead, control or dominate either get disappointed with participatory methods or do harm to the collective processes.

10.1.3. Participant’s Skills and Talents Needed

The work of women’s activist organisations is multifaceted, as the organisations goals are bound by the needs of the society and, therefore, keep changing with time. The demands on the participants are to be versatile and to respond to the various tasks required for the issues and campaigns they choose to be involved in. For a collective to be successful, participants have to be ready to multitask. For example, an organisation might begin its work on a particular campaign ‘against domestic violence’. The skills that are demanded of the members might be public speaking, painting for posters, writing articles, etc. However, when the organisation moves on to handling individual cases of domestic violence, or providing support services, a whole new set of skills are required
such as counselling, awareness of services and community resources, knowledge of the law, etc. Even if the organisation is open to the idea of paid staff, it may not always be possible to pay for the talent that is required due to the limits the organisation’s ideology poses in terms of funding sources.

10.1.4. Variations in Participant’s Skills and Talents Hampering Non-hierarchy

Sometimes differences in skills, knowledge, values, socio-economic status or even the differences between paid and unpaid members might result in new hierarchies within the organisation. However, strategies such as sharing of skills, the rotation of tasks, skill development, team building and training, etc., are adopted to counter differences. According to J. Rothschild-Whit (1982), individual differences in influence, inevitably limits 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 realize 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 (ibid.: 44, 45)

Collective decision-making suggests that all members have the right to identify problems and to work at solutions. The lack of language ability is one of the hurdles to decision-making by consensus as the individual’s verbal skills and confidence to articulate opinions does impact on participation in discussions and then also decision making as well. However, the strategies that have been adopted over the years have been confidence building by entrusting responsibilities such as public sharing of experiences, etc., to enable the member to voice her opinion even if she lacks the language fluency. Another strategy is to speak in the language of the majority and provide translations for those who are less fluent in that language. The more articulate members have to learn to curb wanting to voice their opinion all the time and efforts are to be made to make sense of the opinions of the less articulate members. This is made possible with the value that everyone has something to offer. This equal respect of the ‘other’ is one of the strengths of collective organising.

The responsibility of persons in the so-called ‘advantageous positions’ to not only recognize differences but also act as equalizers is an unspoken given. The extent to which
this enabling role is carried out depends greatly on how committed that individual is to the value of equality. In this context, the 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 also for those who are the ‘enablers’, as referred to above. They have to learn how to handle the process appropriately without being too critical and to negotiate the differences. Thus, one can say that the process of minimizing differences in skills places demands on all the participants. However, according to J. Mansbridge (1973: 361), ‘each group must … understand and find ways to deal with inequalities that cannot be reduced’.

Despite the list of limitations and hurdles, the collective has achieved goals beyond those stated at the time the organisation was founded, that is, the goals articulated in 1986, as we have already seen in the earlier chapters. According to William A. Gamson (1990: 32), the criteria for the success of a movement are (a) acceptance of a challenging group as a legitimate representative of a constituency by the target of collective action, and (b) new advantages won by the challenger which includes a broad range of outcomes that advance the cause of the movement.

The target of collective action may be to change public opinion, and ‘acceptance’ may be inferred when the public views are transformed to promote change as envisaged by the collective action. The new advantages also may be the broader change in public and private values, views, new vocabularies and practices, influencing the framing of an issue by the media, etc. In Goa, the values of non-hierarchy of the women’s collective were not always respected even by the other collaborating organisations or by the government. Today, however, its values, its autonomy and its own identity have been accepted by the society. Although it is a non-registered organisation, it is accepted even by the Government of Goa as an organisation that serves women in the state.

The fact that an organisation such as Bailancho Saad has survived since 1986, coupled with the fact that it has not been exclusive in its experience and that it has shared many similarities in its experience with collective functioning with organisations like Saheli and Forum located in different cities and that they have been working independent of each other, allows us to conclude that this organising method can be replicated. There
are some limitations with its organisational style, as we saw in Chapter 8, such as delayed
decisions due to the discussion process required for consensus, the limitations of part-
time or voluntary work which results in periods of activity and then lull phases as well.
However, by and large, there have been many strengths of collective organising for
women’s empowerment in particular. Given the current political trend and the growth of
intolerance, for the survival of organisations such as these, there has to be in place certain
mechanisms that would protect the organisations from being hijacked by fundamentalist
forces.

Bailancho Saad was established at a period in the women’s movement in India
when society criticized such initiatives as being ‘western’, ‘anti-men and anti-family’,
etc. Through its struggles to be acknowledged by the very society within which it was
operating, this women’s collective, Bailancho Saad survived the societal transformations
and has remained to this day, committed to non-hierarchy and grass-root approaches to
change. For Bailancho Saad, feminist thought has been intertwined with feminist
practice and the outcome has been its interventions and inventions in feminist organising.
Bailancho Saad has been influenced by liberal feminism in that it has laid a lot of stress
on ‘women’s rights’, viewing female subordination as being rooted largely in customary
and legal constraints and hindrances to women’s progress in the public sphere. Like
liberal feminists, it has claimed that socially constructed differences between men and
women are the prime site for women’s oppression. Further, it has spent much energy on
drafting and rewriting laws, advocating reproductive rights, demanding for state facilities
for women and children as well as equal pay for equal work, etc. It has also worked
towards reducing domination, with the goal to eliminate patriarchy from larger
institutions governing society. For this, Bailancho Saad has encouraged its members to be
involved in the current political processes. In keeping with liberal feminist thinking
(Iannello 1992), Bailancho Saad has also accepted that they have to work within
hierarchical organisations as well.

Bailancho Saad’s feminist practice seems to have drawn also from Marxist
feminist theory. An example is its critique of ‘globalization’. It has been focusing on the
impact of capitalism on patriarchy and the division it has brought between public and
private work and has examined how this has forced women into traditional stereotypes. In
the feminist practice of Bailancho Saad, however, we see very little of radical feminist influence. One of the few radical interventions undertaken by the organisation includes the blackening of billboards that were oppressive, or discriminatory, or demeaning to women (see Photo 10.1).

Photo 10.1: Painting over a Bill Board

While Bailancho Saad has acknowledged patriarchy and capitalism as sites of oppression and domination, it has not argued for overturning of cultural institutions like the family, religion, etc., although individual members may have rebelled against social custom in their private lives and remained unmarried, walked out of a violent marriage, or stopped attending religious functions and formal prayers. These, however, have not influenced the group and a large number of members continue to be in marriages, have families and continue to follow religions that they were born into. Regarding reproductive and contraceptive technology, Bailancho Saad did not view them as liberating for women, but, has on the contrary, held them as invasive methods of control over the woman’s body where the power is not with the woman but with the technology.

From Bailancho Saad’s practice we see that it is almost as if post-modern feminist theory has been adopted, although it must be emphasized that there has not been any
deliberate attempt to be guided by it. Post-modern feminist thought rejects labels and categories and that is representative of how Bailancho Saad has conducted itself in its feminist practice over the years.

Anarchist feminism, as advocated by Emma Goldman (1969), which argues for a society without government and without man made law, is far disconnected from Bailancho Saad’s feminist practice. However, it may be pertinent to note that anarchist feminists envisioned a society without domination and worked towards eliminating the hierarchical structures that support domination. They were keenly focused on non-hierarchy, alternative organisational structures and were against coercive power. While all feminists have been concerned with issues of hierarchy and power, these concerns have held prime importance for anarchist feminists.

Whatever the theory that has been the guiding theory of Bailancho Saad, and whatever school the practice of Bailancho Saad can be categorized into, our concern in this study was the outcomes, processes and strategies of collective organising with a clear commitment to non-hierarchy and democratic principles of organising. This case study of Bailancho Saad was an attempt to draw some principles from women’s experiences of democratic or collective organising as contributions to the existing body of democratic theory. However, it must be stated that there can be no universal prescriptions that would be valid for collective organising in all circumstances. What is being suggested here are few guiding principles that have been evolved from the case study. Some of these principles are as follows, though their arrangement is not in any order of importance.

10.2. Some Lessons from Bailancho Saad’s Experience with Collective Organising

The principles drawn from the case study of the non-hierarchical experiment of Bailancho Saad are divided under three broad head namely: (1) collective ideology, (2) participation, and (3) accountability. These are the three most important ingredients for the success of collective organising. However, this list is not conclusive.
10.2.1 Collective Ideology

1. 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.

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

3. In collective organising, the individual and the group are interrelated 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 (a) help build a bond between members, (b) allow members to get familiar with the background and ideology of all members, (c) tackle any difference of opinion, personality clashes, and other interpersonal conflicts that may exist, etc., and (d) allow 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 workshop schedule is not fixed in advance, there is a likelihood of it getting relegated to the backseat when the organisation gets preoccupied with its routine functioning.

10.2.2 Participation

4. Participation is largely dependent on skills and experience of members. Therefore, participation is enhanced within the organisation by providing opportunities for self-development of members through training, including training in human relations, skills development, experience with multiple tasks, etc.

5. Handling certain tasks requires specialised skills, knowledge and sensitivity. In handling a sensitive case, for example, a person who lacks basic communication skills can do great harm to the case. While training can help bridge many barriers, the organisation’s awareness of individual capabilities and talents and personal
limitations and the members’ awareness of the same, contributes to smooth functioning of the organisation.

6. A regular discussion of work done by members in the week keeps the group informed of the areas that need intervention, allows for feedback and remedial action, if necessary.

7. Any organisation working towards change has to constantly keep abreast of the current socio-political and economic scenario, local, national and global and, therefore, building networks with other organisations is fundamental to the organisation’s work.

8. 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 formulated accordingly. Rigid conformity to rules can be a hurdle to innovative planning.

9. Decisions by consensus are time-consuming. However, meetings eating into leisure time or 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. This may not always be possible, however, for example, before programmes, major campaigns, etc.

10. Encouraging discussions on issues such as the caste system, dominance by social class, stereotyping 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.

11. A collective is based on respect for the capabilities of individuals within that collective. When members achieve short-term goals they have been encouraged to aspire for longer-term goals while upholding the value of equality. However, just supporting the value of equality within a collective does not imply that equality always exists, nor does it imply that all participating members will also value
equality. Negotiating differences between the participating individuals is a key to a collective’s success.

12. Encouraging dissent enriches the process of consensus decision-making and helps accept individual differences in opinion.

13. There may be occasions when certain participants do not share all the values of the organisation. Negotiating these differences to arrive at a workable situation ensures that it is not a hurdle to the organisation style.

10.2.3 Accountability

14. When all tasks to be undertaken in the week are discussed at the meetings and the group has clarified what, why, when, how and by whom the tasks have to be accomplished, it encourages sharing of responsibility and ensures accountability. There will then be an agreement about goals and means to achieve them.

15. Leaders or ‘Temporary Specialists’ emerge within the collectives. The temporal tenure of these leaders or specialists is important and their authority results from their ability to motivate others, to judiciously integrate initiatives and efforts of the group and to coordinate the organisation’s endeavours, rather than from a position in a hierarchy.

16. A system of reward or acknowledgement of contribution of individuals to the organisation on a continuous, at least, 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 Bailancho Saad, Saheli and Forum, have been the chief practitioners of the ‘participatory democratic’ mode of social movement organisation with their feminist goal of fostering democratic and caring kinds of processes that empowers 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 the strategies, namely, non-hierarchical processes are rarely considered as important. Programmes for women, even today, largely see women as ‘beneficiaries’ rather than
agents of change. It is time that we took a serious view of the personal/self-development component in programmes for women, as this outcome has far-reaching consequences, which, as mentioned before, 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 empowerment of women if they are equal partners in a democratic process.

Even 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, the collective action does not cease but, in fact, inspires the group to pursue other goals with more vigour and confidence that has been obtained from the earlier work experience. It sometimes might help develop a pool of activists who will participate in other existing organisations, or create models for collective action that could potentially influence similar 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 outcomes, broader cultural outcomes and personal or self-development outcomes are taken into consideration. These outcomes are important and their value needs to be recognised.

Women’s experience of non-hierarchical organising in Goa detailed in Chapters 5, 6, 7 and 8 has shown that, when there is collective action combined with shared values and goals, when there are egalitarian working methods that accept as equals all participants in the action process, when the process is focused on developing confidence and skills of individuals, then, there are greater chances of the efforts being sustained. The sustainability of non-hierarchical methods is evidenced in the continued existence of collective action, the growth in the organisation’s membership, programmes and outreach, and the impact these methods have on other movements.

Thus, the instant research on women’s non-hierarchical organising has been useful case material and examples can be inferred from its experience for better governance and empowerment. However, non-hierarchy cannot exist without commitment and effort on the part of each of the participating members.