CHAPTER 3
RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 INTRODUCTION
In keeping with women’s studies research norms; I have followed an open and transparent approach to the research subject. This has involved attempts to reduce the distance between myself and the respondents through close interactions and sensitive engagement with their everyday concerns through sharing of experiences. These advances made by women’s studies research strategies does not in any way compromise the principles of objectivity required by social science research; but rather, it helps to eliminate some of the unacknowledged biases that may enter the study during the research process and in the analysis of data. Women Studies reconceptualisations of knowledge production processes have contributed to a shift in research practices in many disciplines. “Doing” women’s studies research requires more diverse methodological and self-reflective skills than traditional methodological approaches. Women Studies /feminist scholars have offered new methodological and epistemological insight that validated the existence of women as historical agents. These scholars do not call for the end of scientific research, but rather ask for a re-examination of existing methodologies for a better representation of women’s lives. It is the commitment to the politics of gender equality that fuels women’s studies theories, research questions, analytic categories, and research process.

This chapter begins by looking at the evolution of women studies research framework by first understanding the many biases present in knowledge production process in social sciences disciplines. It then elaborates on the limitations of positivist approach of scientific research set in the Cartesian framework which critiques the narrow research methods adopted in social sciences. Subsequently it delineates the difference between research methodology, methods and techniques. It indicates the feminist research methodological frames that have been developed through their political engagements for gender justice since the 1970s. Against the backdrop of these discussions, this chapter discusses the aims of my study, the rationale for the research design and limitations of the study. It concludes with an account of my experiences of engaging in feminist research methodology.
3.2 GENDER CRITIQUE OF KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION

Women studies scholars have pointed to the biases in social science disciplines through their notable work. Sharmila Rege, for example argues on how sociology despite its claim of being value neutral, was a ‘male stream’ discipline which had been mainly concerned with research on men and by implications with theories for men. She argues that findings based on all male samples had been generalised for the whole population, and issues and areas that concerned women were seen as personal and outside the scope of academic interests. Even when women were included in the research they were often presented in a sexist manner. Sex and gender were seldom seen as explanatory variables; and the explanatory theoretical paradigms often naturalised women’s subordination on biological grounds. Women were thus hidden from the sociological gaze, both theoretically and empirically (Rege, 2003: 4).

Lovenduski tags political science also as sexist in nature. For, not only did it exclude women from its concerns, it also excluded them from the membership in the profession. The complication is that there never was any way that modern study of politics could fail to be sexist. Its empirical concerns were exclusively on the exercise of power in the public domain. Such studies are bound to exclude women who were rarely part of the political elite in their own capacities and did not hold influential positions in government institutions. If women figured in the political science research frames, it was restricted to empirical studies on their participation in electoral politics and predictably these studies contained numerous examples of sexist bias. Nobody felt the need to challenge the foundational assumptions of political science until the advent of feminist questioning of the distinction that political science makes on the exercise of power in the public and private domains. Feminist scholars have pointed out to the exercise of power within the private domain of the home as well as in every aspect of socio-economic and cultural aspects of society (Lovenduski, 1981: 88 – 89).

Psychology too has been severely criticised. In psychology theory and research the male has been regarded as the representation of humanity and female considered largely in relationship to him, the male is considered as the norm, the criterion, whereas the female is merely considered in comparison to the standard. For example, in Freudian psychoanalytic theory, Freud saw male development as the norm – the penis being central to an understanding of the Oedipus complex and all subsequent development. Given that men were seen as the standard, male subjects have been studied much more frequently in research than
have female subjects. In fact there are large bodies of research purporting to be of general psychological significance, which have been only validated male behaviour patterns and are found not to apply in the same way to females. It has also been established that behaviour and characteristics stereotypically ascribed to men and women are differentially valued – masculine traits are perceived as more socially desirable than feminine traits (Walker, 1981: 113-114).

Speaking on the discipline of philosophy, Sheila Ruth claims that misogynist beliefs in the learned writings legitimised sexist ideas and practices in religion, medicine and social institutions and reinforced the worst kinds of oppression, such as witch burning and clitoridectomy. The socio-ethical, biological and even metaphysical misconceptions about women still appear in current philosophical literature (Ruth, 1981: 51).

The publication of several major works by feminist scholars questioned academic scientific claims to traditional notions of objectivity in the research process and described much of social science as grounded in the ideology of patriarchy. To mention a few these includes Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger and Tarule, 1986; Cook and Fonow, 1986; Harding, 1987; Mies, 1983; Oakley, 1981; Smith, 1987; Stanley & Wise, 1983 (as cited in Hunter 2002: 122). These critiques were not limited to the social sciences, but were also strongly stated against the natural sciences. For instance Fausto-Sterling, 1985; Haraway, 1989; Harding, 1986; Keller, 1984; Longino, 1990 (as cited in Hunter 2002:122) have argued that scientific inquiry was not a value-free or an objective endeavour that enabled the researcher to stand outside of culture, ideology, and discourse. Research, as has been conventionally framed, is located within Enlightenment philosophy and has been developed by European male from the elite strata of society.

3.3 EMERGENCE OF SOCIAL SCIENCE RESEARCH

The eighteenth century Enlightenment period, which marks the emergence of science of society, witnessed the emphasis on positivism and empiricism as a major approach to social research. It was based on observation, experimentation and collection of empirical facts to establish or discover laws of society. Thinkers from this school believed that scientific approach to understand society assures valid and accurate knowledge of social life. Research, for them need to be value-free and neutral from the subjective experiences of the researcher. Causality,
validity, standardization, universalisation and generalisations were the major preoccupations of this research method (Bryman, 1988: 24).

Positivism implements standards of knowing that require social distance and purported “objectivity” in relationships between the researcher and the subject of research. Positivism also assumes that an objective reality exists, that there is one truth, and that anyone can discover that truth using the scientific method. Underlying positivism in social sciences is the epistemological belief that what is knowable can be deduced through observation of a phenomena, their properties and relationships can be analysed through mathematical models. Although positivism continues to play an important part in social sciences, it has been widely criticized by researchers in various schools of thought (i.e., the Frankfurt school, feminist methodologists, postmodernists, and critical anthropologists, among others) (Hunter, 2002: 123).

Enlightenment science had empiricism and rational thought as its core values, and was embedded with the Enlightenment ideal of advancement and progress. The seventeenth century Europe witnessed intellectual revolution and was a period of economic change and social unrest. The prevailing views of the cosmos were altered due to scientific revolutions and similarly accepted understanding of human nature and society were transformed through development of secular epistemologies and political theories (Jaggar and Borodo, 1992: 2). The new understandings though were revolutionary did not break entirely with the earlier western tradition. They even reiterated certain themes that were prominent in Greek and medieval thought. The new understandings constituted a distinctively modern formulation and reworked the themes into a tacit framework that shaped most western philosophy and science until the twentieth century. The decisive formulation of this framework was achieved in the seventeenth century by Rene Descartes. Some of the generally accepted Descartes crucial epistemological assumptions as indicated by Jaggar and Borodo (1992 : 3) were as follows:

1. There is objectivity structure in the constitution of reality. This objective structure is independent and does not alter with either human understandings of or perspectives on it.

2. Human understanding or knowledge has access to the structure or nature of reality. This assumption is called “objectivism”

3. Humans gain knowledge of the world as solitary individuals, rather than as socially constituted members of historically changing groups. This assumption is called “epistemological individualism”
4. The principle human faculty for attaining knowledge of reality is reason (rationalism), sometimes working in conjunction with the senses (empiricism).

5. The faculties of reason and sensation are potentially the same for all human beings, regardless of their culture or class, race or sex (universalism). Differences in the situations of human beings, rather than being recognized as providing alternative perspectives on reality are seen as conquerable impediments to neutral, “objective” view.

6. The recommended methods typically endeavour to show how systematic knowledge may be inferred validly from certain or indubitable premises. The assumption that genuine or reliable knowledge is built from simple components that are thought of as epistemologically certain or indubitable is known by philosophers as foundationalism.”

They argue that along with these epistemological assumptions were ideas of dualist ontologies that separated the universal from the particular, culture from nature, mind from body, and reason from emotion. As they write:

“These epistemological and ontological assumptions fit together to constitute a firm and familiar framework for understanding nature, human nature, and human knowledge. Descartes critical quest for certainty, order and clarity was carried on by western thinkers, although not without dissent and challenge, until it reached its culmination in the positivism and neo positivism of Anglo – American analytic philosophy. (Jaggar and Borodo, 1992 : 3)

3.4 CHALLENGES FROM FEMINIST AND OTHERS

In the past hundred years, however the challenges have strengthened and multiplied: individual voices have become choruses of dissent. Marxism, for example challenged methodical individualism and sometimes objectivism, emphasizing how our beliefs about reality arise out of particular forms of social organisation and urging a more historical understanding of the production of knowledge. More recently, foundationalism has been under attack from deconstructionism and other “poststructuralist” perspectives and even from within the Anglo – American analytic tradition itself.(Jaggar and Borodo, 1992: 4).

Contemporary feminist epistemology shares the growing sense that the Cartesian framework is fundamentally inadequate to explain social reality and there is a need to revision approaches to knowing about lived human experiences.

“In its rejection of this framework, feminism borrows from the insights of other traditions, including Marxist historicism, psychoanalytic theory, literary theory and sociology of knowledge. However the claim that the Cartesian framework in addition to other biases, is not gender neutral distinguishes contemporary feminism from these other approaches”(Jaggar and Borodo, 1992: 4).
A major critique to the traditional positivist approach of value free and objective research came from standpoint theory or a standpoint model of research. They largely critiqued the production of knowledge through the voices of the dominant groups of society and then being established as a standardised source of knowledge. It involves the assumption that different social positions produce different experiences and therefore lead to different types of knowledge. A researcher, hence, should engage with the experiences of socially oppressed and marginalised groups. The knowledge derived from this is left to provide a more valid account of the social world than adopting an apparently ‘neutral’ or ‘objective’ stance (Seale, 2004: 510). While proposing standpoint theory Sandra Harding (1998), argues:

“The experiences and lives of marginalised people, as they understand them, provide distinctive problems to be explained or research agendas that are not visible or not compelling to dominant groups. Marginalised experiences and lives have been devalued or ignored as a source of important questions about nature and social relations” (Harding, 1998: 151 as cited in Seale, 2004: 26).

Sociologists and social anthropologists propagated this theory to undertake in-depth, emancipating and egalitarian researches. Feminist researchers too drew heavily from the standpoint epistemology. However critical or standpoint epistemology too has certain limitations. The theory begins with the assumption that the oppressed section of the society has the potential for a complete view emphasizing the view that subordinate have a broader perspective of the powerful or dominant class. Thus leading to a dangerous conclusion the person who is less powerful is more knowledgeable (Poonacha, 2012: 7).

While it is important to analyse the critics of mainstream social science research methods. One cannot ignore the fact that women studies research has its location in social sciences and has developed through critical theory. It becomes imperative to understand the concepts of research methodology, methods and techniques in order to appreciate the nuanced structures of feminist methods and methodology.

3.5 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY, METHODS AND TECHNIQUES

Research Methodology is a way to systematically solve problem. It may be understood as science of studying how science is done scientifically. It includes various steps that are generally adopted by the researcher along with the logic behind them. A research method is a procedure by which we arrive at certain conclusions. Research methods refer to the behaviour and instruments used in selecting and constructing research technique. In short,
analysis of historical data, mass observation, focussed group discussions, interviews, participant observations; life history methods are some of the examples of research methods. Research techniques refer to the behaviour and instruments we use in performing research operations such as making observations, recording data, techniques of processing data and the like. Whereas use of attitude scale, use of socio metric scales, audio visuals, statistical compilations and identification of socio economic background of the respondents are examples of some of the research techniques (Kothari, 1990: 25).

It is the methods that generate techniques. However, in practice, the two terms are taken as interchangeable and when we talk of research methods we do, by implication, include research techniques within their compass (Kothari, 1990:25). Data collection in social research is broadly classified into quantitative and qualitative methods of data collection. Quantitative research techniques, based on statistically representative sample, translate individual’s experiences in predefined categories and emphasise more on the objectivity and universality of the research. Qualitative research techniques, on the other hand, takes into consideration the experiences, emotions and understanding of the given situation and interpretation of the same with subjective and contextual perspective. The word qualitative implies an emphasis on processes and meanings which are not rigorously examined or measured in terms of quantity, amount, intensity or frequency. It stresses the socially constructed nature of reality, the intimate relationship between the researcher and what is studied. In qualitative research, researcher seeks answers to questions which stress how social experience is created and given meaning, it underlines the value-laden nature of inquiry, whereas the quantitative analysis emphasize on the causal relationships between variables and not processes (Denzin and Ryan, 2007: 582-583).

Acknowledging the biases in knowledge production process and the limitation of the approaches adopted in social science research methods and at the same time understanding the difference in research methodology, methods and techniques foregrounded the many reasons why women studies need to engage in alternative strategies and approaches towards research. As Sharmila Rege (2003: 7) reiterates that “Feminist had to direct all efforts towards establishing women’s experiences as significantly different from men’s and incorporating women’s perspectives as theorists and subjects of study”. Feminist sociologists have responded to the challenges posed by critics of traditional social scientific approaches
by developing alternative strategies that remain sensitive to the dynamics of power evident in social research (Naples, 2003:12).

### 3.6 AIM OF FEMINIST RESEARCH

Feminist research and methods are a response to dominant research methods that claim that truth can be found only by using objective and neutral means, such as the scientific method which claims that researchers can and should be unbiased and that it is possible to observe and measure phenomena. The positivist approach of research believes that scientific methods can produce real knowledge. Often in this type of research women are overlooked and misrepresented. (Gatenby & Humphries, 2000)

Feminist research critically questions the taken-for-granted received theories, sciences and research process. Such critical interrogation of various disciplines from the standpoint of women’s experiences has grown out of the contemporary feminist struggles for gender equality. Following the powerful insight of the women’s movement of 1960’s which had raised debates around ‘personal is political’, feminist scholars raised the need for research methods that could challenge the dualities between theory and praxis and the researcher and the researched (Naples, 2003: 13) The underpinning of feminist research is critical theory. Feminist scholars have interpreted the basic premise and purpose of feminist research and women’s emancipation differently based on their theoretical locations and understandings. These differences have informed methods/techniques of research. (Naples, 2003: 14)

The need for feminist research arises from the deeper need to understand the roots of women’s subordination and the reason why their knowledge/experiences are not reflected within established theories thereby indicating that knowledge is not value neutral (Poonacha, 2012: 3) Some argue that feminist research cannot be different from mainstream/humanities methods. There is no research method that can be classified as feminist – rather methods come from quantitative or qualitative research tag which are then amended to meet feminist principles (Poonacha, 2012:5). Feminist research methods don’t use different methods rather they use different perspective. (Reinharz, 1992)

The aim of a feminist research is to deepen the understanding of prevailing inequalities, sexism and consciously challenge socio cultural practices as well as economic and political systems that ignore displace and silence women.(Poonacha 2012: 3) Since
dominant research paradigms fail to capture the essence of women’s experiences, feminist research through appropriate tools and techniques capture the muted voices of women. Thus the aim is to bring an emancipator process for the researcher and the participants which would lead to social change. (Reinharz, 1992)

To develop a holistic understanding of lived experiences, research processes and methods necessarily require to consider and women’s daily experiences and their informal theorizing. This idea that the process of knowledge construction should be democratised and empowering to all the participants of the research forms the basis of feminist approaches to building theory and knowledge (Poonacha, 2012: 4). Feminist Research strives to represent human diversity and attempts to develop special relations with the people studied. Feminist researchers believe that females are worth examining as individuals and as people whose experience is interwoven with other women. Feminists are interested in women as individuals and as a social category (Reinharz, 1992). There is no single “feminist way” to do research. There is lot of creativity that feminist researchers apply to their research projects. As Reinharz aptly sums it, as a research scholar “I do not identify my research methods as ‘feminist research methods rather I identify myself as a feminist doing research”.

3.7 FEMINIST METHODOLOGY

There is debate over what feminist methodology is, and whether it exists. Chafetz (2004) argues that there is no such thing as a feminist methodology and that we should use all and any research tools to carry our research on gender/women. In contrast Baber (2004) argues that there is such a thing as feminist methodology and that some research tools are not useful for feminist research. Baber (2004) argues that feminist methodology is distinct in its assumptions and its goal to make women’s lives better. There is some consistency in the literature that social change is central to feminist research (Fonow & Cook, 2005) and that feminist research is about improving women’s lives (Harding and Norberg, 2005). Reinharz, 1992: 175) argues that “the purpose of feminist research must be to create new relationships, better laws, and improved institutions”.

Undoubtedly, feminist methods privilege women’s experience. Privileging women’s experiences is a response to these experiences being silenced and misconstrued. Just focusing on women, however, doesn’t ensure that women being researched will have power in the research process (Shope, 2006: 179).
3.8 PRINCIPLES OF FEMINIST RESEARCH

3.8.1 Relationship between respondents and researcher

Feminist research recognizes the power inequalities between the researcher and respondents. Feminist research requires that the researcher seeks to mitigate this power inequality that exists (Hunter 2002; Shope 2006). In order to do so, there is a need to ensure that the participant’s experiences are made central to the research and the interests of the researcher are subordinated to it (Fitzgerald, 2004: 236).

To achieve this objective, the research methods engaged should reduce the gaps in power between the researcher and those getting researched. One of the ways suggested by Gatenby and Humphries is Participatory Action Research (PAR) project wherein the goal was to enhance the development of the participants as ‘co-researchers’ considering the value of experiences they bring in. The power imbalances in research can be dealt by giving the participants an opportunity to design the research. Fitzgerald (2004) suggests participants ‘ownership’ over the research by engaging with the participants from the beginning to end of the research project.

Another method that feminist engage in is researchers and participants jointly undertake the research writing or the researcher gets the writing approved by the participants. The underlying idea is to actively give an opportunity to the participants to give their feedback on the end result derived from the research. This method of getting the research and writing back to the communities and getting it ‘validated’ is recommended by Hunter (2002:128). Fitzgerald (2004) vests the right to the women (participants) in her study to give their approval to publish her writing about them. Sharing the research with the participants and taking prior approval before publishing is an attempt to address the power inequalities between the researcher and those being researched. This becomes important in order to challenge the dominant power relations and the status quo (Fitzgerald, 2004: 238). This is also a way to prevent speaking for women and their experiences (Shope, 2006: 175).

Despite these methods, the power equations do not necessarily get balanced as the researcher holds significant power over how the results are disseminated and how the research is conducted. Until the broader power inequalities such as inequalities based on class
and ethnicity are changed, it is not possible to bring in equality researchers and participants (Shope, 2006).

### 3.8.2 Reflexivity

In order to mitigate the power inequality in the research process, it is necessary for the researcher to acquire the habit of self-reflexivity. Reflexivity requires that the researcher continuously reflect on the research process, her methods, field-practices and how her social positions affect the research process (Burman et al. 2001; Fitzgerald 2004). Reflexivity also requires that the researcher writes herself into the research without assuming a value-neutral and objective gaze on the research subject (Fonow and Cook, 2005). She reveals her emotional reactions to the research. Reflexivity is a continuous process of self reflection (Shope, 2006).

Reflexivity can bring attention to a researcher’s biases and assumptions (Hunter 2002). It is crucial that research observes social position (gender, socio-economic standing, ethnicity, education etc) for if they do not examine, then biases and preconceived assumptions will mark their work (Shope 2006). However it will be incorrect to think that reflexivity erases power inequalities (Shope 2006). One of the criticism on reflexivity has been for making the research all about the researcher and drowning out the voices of the participants (Fonow and Cook 2005; Shope 2006).

### 3.8.3 Privileging women’s experiences

Feminist research raises the question whether research can and should be conducted by people who are socially located outside the group of research participants. Women’s lives and their experiences form the core of the standpoint theories. (Fawcett and Hearn, 2004; Smith 1999). A standpoint perspective assumes that “experiences produce knowledge and knowledge divorced from experience is colonizing, appropriating and oppressive,” (Fawcett & Hearn 2004: 209). According to Walby (2001) the two critical assumptions of standpoint theories are that the marginalised are in a better position to understand their marginalisation and secondly they have the accurate knowledge of their marginalisation as compared to people who have not lived those experiences. Pohlhaus (2002) have similar views as according to her people in privileged positions can be less objective. This is because people coming from a privileged position due to their social standing are not compelled to question their position in the world.
Seen from the point of women’s experiences, standpoint epistemology becomes complicated. This is because gender is not a single identity categorization. Women are not a homogenous group; they occupy difference social, economic, ethnic and power positions. Therefore, Chafetz (2004) disagrees with the standpoint claim that people in marginal positions have better knowledge than those outside. She argues that all knowledge is biased and therefore people in marginalized positions don’t necessarily have an accurate perspective, but rather a different perspective. Standpoint approach, that claims to speak for all women, have tended to collapse the differences among women and consequently have focused on the experiences of privileged women (Pohlhaus, 2002). Fawcett and Hearn (2004) argue that there is a need to make common connections between different experiences of people to build common cause and mobilize allies. It cannot privilege one set of experiences over others, but there is a need to find common grounds for alliances.

3.9 MODELS OF FEMINIST RESEARCH

The need to emancipate women has led to experimentation with research methods that involve women as participants and researchers. It treats research participants as co-creators of knowledge. The research models systematically used by feminist are as under

1) **Feminist Empiricism:** “It employs the current standards of quantitative/qualitative inquiry within each discipline. It self-consciously creates new and rigorous research practises, rather than mechanically apply research standards. It believes that the context of discovery is just as important as the discovery”.

2) **Feminist Standpoint:** Standpoint theories place women’s experiences and lives at the centre of research (Fawcett & Hearn, 2004; Smith 1999). Research done from the perspectives of standpoint theories stresses a particular view that builds on and from women’s experiences. It begins from the social division of labour and from accounts of social reality that emerge from different social practices” (Kruks, 2001 : 112).

3) **Feminist Postmodernism:** “It is a newer development within feminist theory and research and has received diverse and contradictory responses within and outside the feminist domain (Poonacha, 2012:12). Some feminist scholars have found useful the sensitivity postmodernism demonstrates towards a greater multiplicity of power relations. While others believe that overtly textual focus of postmodernism renders the lived realities of women irrelevant”(Naples, 2003 : 23).

3.10 AIM OF CURRENT STUDY

The aim of my study is to understand the professional and personal struggles of Sahyoginis who work with the poorest women to bring social change. The assumption that I make is that the sahayoginis come from the same social strata as the beneficiaries of the SHG
programme. Therefore, how do they view their work? What kinds of personal and professional struggles do they face? How does their work-role empower and transform them?

The primary aim is to bring in the rich experiences of these development workers who in the process of transforming the lives of poor rural women have themselves got transformed. While success stories on the change that the SHG programme has made in the lives of poor women, who are the beneficiaries of the programme are well documented, no in-depth investigation has been made on the lives of the development worker to see how they have been impacted by the programme. Similarly critical studies discuss the role of the government and non-government organizations in promoting SHG programmes. These studies highlight to role of the management and those responsible for the programme planning and implementation for the success of the programme. But what is forgotten is that the burden of the programme rests on the shoulders of the development workers, who travel from village to village motivating and promoting the programme. In other words, the hands that work in the field, to bring the transformation get overlooked. My attempt here is to bring to the forefront the immense contributions of sahayoginis to the SHG programme and aims to understand their expectations, their daily lives, and coping strategies in meeting their professional and family responsibilities. It is also an attempt to see how work and the role played transforms the woman into rising above the ordinary.

3.11 EXPERIENCES OF ENGAGING WITH FEMINIST RESEARCH METHODS

My field experiences are rich and I was able to see the differences between the ideal and reality of women’s lives. My enquiry into the coping strategies of women bound by family and work responsibilities got the pat answer that they were able to cope because of a supportive family (husband, in-laws and maternal family). My observation was that many sahayoginis brought their young children to the CMRC centres (place of work), so the place of work also becomes a support system. It may be assumed that some women had supportive families, but their work was also possible because of the strong female networking that grew in the workplace. This strong female workplace bonding enabled women cope with their multiple responsibilities. Through observation and reflecting on the realities of women’s lives through observation conversations and dialogues, I was able to empathise with them. It made me conscious of what Spender (1981:8) expressed when she writes: ‘At the core of feminist ideas, is the crucial insight that there is no one truth, no one authority, no one objective method which leads to the production of pure knowledge.
During the field work, I became critically conscious of my own bias, attitude and location in the study. One of the areas in my study was my concern about sexual harassment at work place. Since the sahyoginis worked in the bottom of the organisation hierarchy, I was more than convinced that there would be cases of sexual harassment by the male superiors. However my assumptions proved false, as the research progressed. I realised that the sahyoginis were strong women, who did not experience sexual harassment from their male colleagues at work, rather some of them were part of the “Vishaka Commitee” which deals with cases of sexual harassment.\textsuperscript{1} They were aware of the laws, their rights and how to get their grievances addressed\textsuperscript{2}. I learnt that reflexivity can bring attention to a researcher’s biases and assumptions as commended by Hunter (2002).

As a women studies scholar one of the other principles that I tried to bring in my field is to minimize the distance between the researcher and the researched. With this objective in mind, when I undertook my fieldwork in the villages, I ensured that I dress simple. This is not to say I was able to completely overcome the barriers of my class and urban background. What I did however was to listen with empathy and understanding to make the women feel comfortable with me. As Shope (2006) remarks there are some barriers of class and ethnicity to equality that may be difficult to bridge. We can only try to mitigate the differences through our field approach.

Self-reflexivity makes one appreciate the ground-level realities of women’s lives with empathy. Nandurbar is an economically backward district of Maharashtra, with poor basic amenities. Akkalkuwa and Dhadgaon were among the remote and tribal talukas of the district which were part of the research. While conducting research, one of the topics that I enquired was the issue of sanitation. Initially the reaction to the question was not forthcoming and the sahyoginis appeared little hesitant to discuss. So I tweaked the question and tried to talk about sanitation habits of the women beneficiaries. Soon they admitted that people in the region

\textsuperscript{1} Each District office had formed a Vishaka Committee and had maintained a register for recording any cases of sexual harassment. Atleast one Sahyogini from any of the CMRCs in the district was part of that committee. Apart from the appointed Sahyogini of the Vishaka Committee the others too were aware on the reason for forming of the committee.

\textsuperscript{2} This is not to say that sahayoginis do not face harassment when they travel to different villages from other men, as fresh entrants to the programme. These women develop coping mechanism and depend on strong female support systems. As they gain recognition for their work in the village, the sahyogini is viewed as a person in authority as someone in a leadership position. The harassment then disappears.
were not used to having toilets at home. Many of them defecate in the open also due to absence of toilets at home.

Even the very few that have built toilets at home, prefer to defecate in the open fields. The reasons provided, ranged from feeling claustrophobic in the constructed toilets to lack of water or maintenance of the toilet. The sahyoginis also reasoned that with so much poverty in the land, building toilets is not a priority, even though the government provides subsidy. I then appreciated Sundaram’s (1986: 4) statement, “The absence of latrine facility, is so entrenched both physically and psychologically in a large part of the rural community that its need is often not even felt.” It is not possible to be critical of people and communities without seeing the total context, of abject poverty and deprivation. Sanitation is a sensitive topic wherein the women do not want their community to be looked down upon by an outsider. As a researcher trying to minimise the divide between the researcher and the participant, I also realised the power dynamics at play. Handling sensitive topics needs lot of empathy and tactfulness since the researcher uses his or her privilege to ask personal and sensitive questions about the community practices.

3.12 RESEARCH DESIGN

In my present research, exploratory and descriptive research technique has been used. Exploratory research design does not aim to provide the final and conclusive answers to the research questions, but merely explores the research topic with varying levels of depth. “Exploratory research tends to tackle new problems on which little or no previous research has been done” (Brown 2006). Moreover, it has to be noted that “exploratory research is the initial research, which forms the basis of more conclusive research. It can even help in determining the research design, sampling methodology and data collection method” (Singh,1983).

Sandhusen (2000) draw the difference between exploratory and conclusive research by stating that in exploratory research will result in a range of causes and alternative options for a solution of a specific problem, whereas, conclusive research will identify the final information that is the only solution to an existing research problem. In other words, the difference between exploratory and conclusive research designs is that exploratory research design simply explores the research questions, leaving room for further research, whereas conclusive research design is aimed to provide final findings. The major advantage of the
exploratory method lies in its ability to generate many ideas that could be further explored in more controlled conditions, apart from overcoming the most difficult portion of an inquiry. Exploratory studies provide scope for constant reformulation and redirection of the enquiry, as new information is obtained. There is a need to be alert to clues that one could miss out if the research design is entirely predetermined. The researcher must have the skill to pull together many diverse bits of information into a unified interpretation. This type of study leads to the insight or hypotheses, but they do not test or demonstrate them. Careful and controlled studies are needed to test whether the hypotheses that emerge out of studies employing exploratory method have general acceptability and applicability. Thus exploratory study is an initial step in a continuous research process. They are undertaken with the explicit purpose of formulating a problem for more precise investigation or for developing a hypothesis (Singh 1983: 101).

As seen from the literature review (Chapter 2) although we do have studies on village workers such as nurses, health and family planning workers, gramsevikas, (Bhoite, 1987) there is no study conducted on sahyoginis working with MAVIM in SHG movement in Maharashtra. In this study, I have drawn on feminist standpoint epistemology and used reflective practice to make visible what is privileged as ethnographic data. Reflexive practices include decisions on an array of strategies, such as the entry point to the village, how to approach the respondents and even my dress. According to Naples (2003: 38) these considerations are the beginnings of the reflexive process and that “by deepening and extending the process of reflexivity to other dimensions of ethnographic research one can generate more complex analyses of the relations of ruling and the development of oppositional consciousness.”

3.13 TOOLS OF DATA COLLECTION

The study uses qualitative research techniques and is based on primary sources of data, which I personally collected through my fieldwork. Nonetheless where possible I have examined the available secondary sources, such as the organization website, reports and training manuals. Secondary sources were useful as benchmarks for the study and to understand the organizational structure of MAVIM, management practices regarding recruitment, training and disciplinary practices. The primary data collection is through extensive fieldwork in five districts of Maharashtra and through seventy personal interviews, five focus group discussions and three oral histories.
Semistructured interviews

Semi-structured interview schedule was the main technique of data collection used in this study. The schedule comprised a set of a list of close ended and open ended questions. Responses to the close ended questions are occasionally tabulated for effectual representation. The demographic profile of the respondents was tabulated. This was not an attempt to ‘quantify’ the data collected, but rather to appreciate some of the broad socio-economic characteristics of the respondents. The main focus of the interview schedule was on the ‘responses’ of the respondents. It was difficult to categorize all the responses of the respondents and nearly impossible to effectively quantify. The tables presented in the subsequent chapters were only for a clear representation of the demographic profile of the individual representation.

As pointed Reinharz (1992) semi structured interviews is the principal means by which feminists seek to actively involve the respondents in the construction of data about their lives. By using open-ended interviews it is possible to explore people’s views of reality and it allows the researcher to generate theory. Open ended interviews produce non standardized information that allows researcher to develop a nuanced understanding of people’s lives and the meaning they impute to their experiences. Face-to-face interview gives the participant the confidence of giving the answers. This method is useful in feminist research because it gives an opportunity to the researcher to access people’s ideals, thoughts and memories in their own words rather than in the words of the researcher. This is useful particularly in the study of women because, for centuries, women’s ideas have been left or side-stepped or men have spoken for women. Some feminist researchers have gone to great lengths to record and analyse women’s speech (Reinharz, 1992).

The semi structured interview schedule used in this study was divided into primarily 5 parts: The first part, comprised personal information such as age, qualification, marital status, children, place of residence, which provided the socio-economic background of the respondent. It also operated as an ice breaker enabling women to relax and talk about themselves. The questions asked to the participants in this section enabled to disclose information which was known to them, putting them to ease and convincing them that the interview had relevance to them as individuals. The second part of the schedule, asked questions about their work place, training, challenges. The third part focused on work and its influence. The fourth part posed questions on their circumstances, role models, decision,
choices. And finally, the fifth part asked questions on their support system, change in perspective and attitude of the family and society as well as the personal life transformation they experienced. The questions enabled a structure to the interview process, without restricting in the fluidity of the process of interviewing (See appendix 3.1 for the interview schedule).

By following the framework of feminist research frame, care was taken so as to let the respondent answer the question outside the purview of the schedule as many instances were found that although the answer did not necessarily pertain directly to the question asked, but the information provided was important from the research perspective. For example, while a question was put on their aspirations for themselves, the sahyoginis would also mention their aspirations for their children and what dreams they had for them. Anecdotal narratives that emerged in the interviews showed that it is not easy to disconnect one’s professional and personal lives. These are closely entwined.

3.13.2 Focussed Group Discussions

Focussed Group Discussion (FGD) was used to collect a concentrated set of observations in a short time span. It was used in this study to gather preliminary data and aid the development of the interview schedule and clarify research findings. The comparisons that participants make among each other's experiences and opinions are a valuable source of insights into complex behaviours and motivations. The reason to use FGD technique was because it provides a common platform to reflect on issues of consensus and diversity. No doubt this method may have few disadvantages because the more vocal members of the group may dominate the proceedings and influence the nature of the data. FGD may be defined as a research technique that collects data through group interaction on a topic determined by the researcher. In essence, it is the researcher's interest that provides the focus, whereas the data themselves come from the group interaction (Morgan 1996: 6). The main advantage of FGDs, in comparison with participant observation, is the opportunity it provides to observe a large amount of interaction on a topic in a limited period of time, based on the researcher's ability to assemble and direct the focus group sessions. Scholars have indicated that this control is also a disadvantage, because it means that FGDs take place in some sense unnatural social settings.
Focus groups are (a) limited to verbal behaviour, (b) consist only of interaction in discussion groups, and (c) are created and managed by the researcher. First, like all forms of interviews, focus groups are largely limited to verbal behaviour and self-reported data. Second, even if focus groups do bring group interaction into the picture, there are still many interactions that cannot be re-created in focus groups” (Morgan, 1996: 15)

FGDs in my study were used to get general information as to attitude and general belief and understand what empowerment meant to them and their expectations from the organization. My criterion for selection of respondents to participate in the FGD was that they should have a minimum of three years of work experience. But this was not always seen as a mandatory requirement. More important to the FGD was to make them talk of their experiences in the group forum. The FGDs was considered important an important method of data collection because a major programme called the Tejaswini programme that MAVIM had initiated with funds from IFAD was coming to an end, hence the sahyoginis were insecure about their future work prospects. (See Appendix 3.2 A, 3.2 B, 3.2 C, 3.2 D, 3.2E for the FGD schedule)

3.13.3 Oral History method

Three oral histories were conducted with the help of an in-depth questionnaire. This method was seen as useful to get an in-depth understanding of the life of the individual and bring out certain concerns. It was an attempt to see the individual’s life in the context of the socio-economic, political and family context. Sheridan (1983: 12) writes:

“Oral Life histories are unique and add something distinctive to these other forms of data, and thus bring in a deeper and a different understanding of social process. Participant observation and in depth interviews strongly supported by historical and documentary research are some of the important methods used. Biographical method and life history method complement as well as distinguish each other. While biographical method is used with eminent people life history method is used with ordinary people. In biographical method the researcher can give background on the subject with legal documents and writings. In contrast, the published record of an ordinary individual may be negligible; thus the importance of oral material comes to the fore in life histories.”

By using oral history method, I was able to draw out the innate reasons for the individual’s particular traits and how certain incidents in childhood has shaped the course of her life. A participant, when asked ‘who comprised her family?’ immediately referred to her brothers and sisters, despite the fact that the respondent was married with one child. The respondent was the eldest in her family and after her mother passed away she was the one
who took care of her siblings, since the father was indifferent to them. Even after marriage, her siblings stay with her and she is responsible for them. Her family included them and not just her husband and child.

3.14 PURPOSIVE SAMPLING

The nature of this enquiry required a purposive sample. A purposive sample is seen as a non-representative subset of some larger population, and is constructed to serve a very specific need or purpose. Purposive sampling selection is done to exclude those who do not suit the purpose. MAVIM is the nodal agency to promote SHG programmes in Maharashtra which employs 1200 sahyoginis. While deciding on the sample size for my current study, one of the main criteria was to include sahyoginis who have at least completed three years in the organisation, as this would give sufficient time to understand the culture of the organisation. Moreover by the time the sahyoginis complete three years of service, they would have completed the requisite number of trainings. It was decided to have 70 personal interviews and 5 focussed group discussions. The focussed group discussions were over and above the sample of 70. Initially only 3 districts were to be covered. However MAVIM requested a fair representation on sahyoginis working both in tribal and rural belt. All the interviews were conducted in Marathi.

3.15 GEOGRAPHICAL LOCATION

The criteria for selection of the districts and the region were primarily based on MAVIM presence in the 35 districts of Maharashtra. However in order to do justice to this study three main criterions were used in the selection of sample: 1) The study sample should include sahyoginis working in tribal, semi-rural and rural areas because it is likely that these sahyoginis have different work challenges and experiences; 2) the study must focus primarily on the less developed regions of Maharashtra and it must take into account the socio-economic and cultural differences in each region; and 3) the sahyoginis must have at least three years’ experience as development workers as this would ensure that they have the work experience and commitment to their roles.

Based on these criterions, the respondents in the study were drawn from Marathwada, Vidarbha, Khandesh and Raigad regions. The selection of the districts was made after numerous meetings and discussions with MAVIM officials. The five districts selected for the study were Aurangabad, Thane, Nanded, Yavatmal and Nandurbar. Districts of Nanded,
Yavatmal and Thane have had SHG programmes for over 20 years. Similarly the sahyoginis working in these districts had a long experience of serving the SHG women. The detailed criterion for district selection is given in **Appendix 3.3 (District selection Criteria)**. Each district brought its uniqueness in the study. Yavatmal region was selected as this region which was once known as the region of ‘white gold’ (due to cotton crop) has now become infamous for the highest number of farmer suicides and now known as the region of ‘white shroud.’ Nandurbar which separated from the Dhule region is considered among the most economically backward districts of the Maharashtra. One can see the huge socioeconomic divide right from the transport to infrastructure of the state. The region of Marathwada comprising Raigad, Nagpur and Nashik was the erstwhile Khandesh region. Marathwada has unique economic growth, history, climate as well as different people perspectives. The interview were conducted at following places

i. In Aurangabad district, Waluj and Phulambry were the talukas were interviews were conducted. Sahyoginis working from Sillod, Phulambri, Gangapur, Waluj and Lasur participated in the interview and FGD.

ii. In Thane district, Bhiwandi was the taluka and Sahyoginis working for Aangaon CMRC participated in the interview and FGD

iii. In Yavatmal district, Ner, Pandarkavda and Yavatmal city were the taluka and Sahyoginis associated with these centers participated in the interview and FGD

iv. In Nandurbar district, the talukas selected were Akkalkuwa, Dhadgaon and Nandurbar city limits and Sahyoginis associated with these centers participated in the interview and FGD

v. In Nanded district the talukas selected were Kinwat, Ardhapur, and Nanded city, the Sahyoginis associated with Mahur, Himayatnagar, Kinwat, Ardhapur and Nanded CIDCO centers participated in the interview and FGD. In Kinwat taluka the interviews were organised in one of the SHG womens house as all the staff of MAVIM including the Sahyoginis as well as the office staff were involved in mass marriage ceremony function which was organised at Kinwat, hence between managing the event the Sahyoginis took turns to attend the interview schedule. Table 3.1 given below gives details of the districts and sample size
TABLE 3.1
DISTRICTS AND SAMPLE SIZE

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>District</th>
<th>Number of Sahyogini</th>
<th>Focused Group Discussions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Aurangabad</td>
<td>13 *</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thane</td>
<td>7 *</td>
<td>Nil</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nanded</td>
<td>16*</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yavatmal</td>
<td>16*</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nandurbar</td>
<td>18*</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>70</strong></td>
<td><strong>5</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*includes Sahyoginis who have now been promoted to CMRC Manager or ADCO of the district

3.16 LIMITATIONS OF STUDY

This was a study to be conducted in 5 districts of Maharashtra. It needed massive logistics requirements and assistance of the officers in MAVIM’s headquarters, the district coordinating officers and the managers of the CMRC. The sample selection was purposive and it was only with the help of these officers that the sahayoginis who formed part of the study could be identified. The Sahyoginis who are field agents and have prescribed set of duties had to juggle their daily work schedule to come and attend the interview. These interviews had to be carried in a common place such as the specified CMRC which was relatively close for the Sahyoginis. Although utmost care was taken while conducting each interview that separate space was allocated and the opinions voiced by her is not audible to others. However each interview took substantial amount of time and many Sahyoginis would find out from others before hand as to what were the questions asked thereby preparing themselves for the questions when their turn arrived. All the interviews were conducted in Marathi which is the language of the state. Despite that Maharashtra has many dialects and sometimes it did become difficult to understand particular dialect.

3.17 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Confidentiality was maintained regarding the details of the participants in the research. The information they divulged has not been shared with anyone in anyway that would interfere with their personal or professional lives. Before conducting the interview brief information about the research was provided. Each individual was specifically asked whether they are willing to participate in the research and after obtaining consent from each
of the participant was the interview conducted. Written consent was taken from respondents for participation, photographs and audio recording of their discussions. It was also made clear that at any point of time they can withdraw from the interview process or they have the right not to answer any question if they are not comfortable answering them. Even participants from focus group discussions were informed about the details and the purpose of the study. See Appendix 3.4 for consent form.

SUMMARY

The research study has used women studies framework and has argued how feminist research methods enhance the research and overcome the limitations of the more dominant disciplines of social sciences. Women studies scholars have also pointed to the positivist approach in research methods which fail to see more than one single truth. The need for alternative techniques was felt due to absence of ‘other’ voice in the studies. The aim of the study was to bring forth the rich experiences of the respondents (in this case women development worker). By engaging in the principles of feminist research such as reflexivity and standpoint epistemology, I have brought into focus some of the on field experiences. The research design used is exploratory method as the research aim to bring into focus the ‘invisible’ workforce in the development process. Purposive sampling technique has been used. The sample size is restricted to 70 which have been carried in 5 districts of Maharashtra. The 5 FGDs are over and above the sample of 70. Through the use of Semi structured interviews, FGDs and Oral history method, the research has tried to tap the contributions as well as process of transformation which the respondent experiences in her personal and professional live.

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