CHAPTER NINE

OTHER COLLECTIVE INTERVENTIONS: Forum and Saheli – Some Comparative Insights

… setting up collective structures is a brave step; it is more difficult to be nonconformist and search for alternatives. The process is slow, painful and arduous … But there is no such thing as a structureless group. Wherever there is a group that carries on some sustained activity and has a purpose, the group can be said to have a structure. The real difference is in the explicit or implicit nature of the rules and norms of the group. What are usually called structured groups have their rules in the form of constitutions and manifestos whereas the informal ones have tacit and flexible rules

— Nandita Gandhi and Nandita Shah: *The Issues at Stake*

There have been a few case studies on other ‘collective interventions’ focusing on women’s issues and on NGOs (see Brown 1992, Iannello 1992, Gandhi and Shah 1992 and Hilhorst 2003). In this chapter, two other collective interventions for women’s empowerment from around the country, namely, Forum Against Oppression of Women (FAOW) in Mumbai and Saheli in New Delhi are briefly discussed. These collectives bear some similarities to Bailanco Saad, such as being ideologically opposed to hierarchy and developing the service or outreach component of the organisation, while at the same time being actively involved in campaign work on a range of issues related to women. Yet, they have been functioning independently in three different states, though networking with each other on common issues. In this chapter insights into the experiences of FAOW and Saheli will be drawn from information obtained from key informants in the respective organisations, and from information from secondary sources including reports, booklets, etc., of the respective organisations. Some of the informants were contacted over e-mail.
Forum Against the Oppression of Women

9.1. About the ‘Forum’

The Forum Against the Oppression of Women (FAOW), earlier called Forum Against Rape, was started in the year 1979 after the ‘Mathura case’ and it ‘provided a common platform for women from different political parties, progressive groups, community organisations, and individual women to come together and plan a sustained campaign’ (Forum 1990: 5). ‘Although everyone condemns rape, the reasons were poles apart. For the opposition it was a question of “law and order”. For community organisations, a way of increasing their local support and mass-base, for the liberals and moralists (the judiciary included) it was a question of “violation of her honour and chastity” (ibid.: 8). Yet, in 1979, these people with varying ideologies came together to form the Forum Against Rape.

9.2. The ‘Mathura’ Case

On 26 March 1972, a young girl from a tribal background, about 14 years at that time, was raped by a policeman ‘Ganpat’ while another constable ‘Tukaram’ watched. This happened at night, near the police station in a village in Maharashtra. The Bombay High Court sentenced the accused Ganpat to five years and Tukaram to one year rigorous imprisonment. This decision was, however, reversed by the Supreme Court in 1978, as it held that ‘the alleged intercourse was a peaceful affair’ and that there was ‘no reasonable evidence of guilt on the part of the policemen’. The judges of the Supreme Court held that

there were reasons to doubt Mathura’s character as she was not a virgin, had a boyfriend to whom her own family had objections to and that there were no signs on the men’s bodies of her having resisted their sexual advances. The unwillingness for sexual intercourse was construed as a lie and an attempt to defame the policemen (Gandhi and Shah 1991: 36).

A year later, that is, in September 1979, four lawyers (Upendra Baxi, Lotika Sarkar, Ragunath Kelkar and Vasudha Dhagamwar), who came across this judgment, were horrified by the verdict of the Supreme Court, and requested for the reopening of the
case. ‘It was not only a rage against the bias and misogyny of the court but against society which treated the victim as an offender and let the offender go scot free. It was also a rage against the fear of sexual violence that every woman carries deep in her heart’ – these were the reasons behind the coming together of 40 or so women in 1979 as was stated in the Forum Booklet, *Moving ...but not quite there* (1990: 2). This was the first time in the history of India that demonstrations were held all over the country on the issue of rape.

A public meeting at Cama Hall in the Fort area in Mumbai (then Bombay) was called on 23 February 1980, appealing to trade unions, women’s organisations, democratic rights organisations, student organisations, lawyers, teachers, journalists, dalit groups and others to join in the demand for an immediate reopening of the Mathura case and for the amendment of the rape law. This was the beginning of the Forum Against Rape, now known as Forum Against Oppression of Women and more popularly referred to as the Forum. ‘When the Forum was formed in 1979, we came from different political backgrounds and had different ideas about feminism, organisational structures and about radical social change’ (Forum 1990: 52). In the early years, the group met in Flat No 3, Carol Mansion, Sitaldevi Temple Road, Mahim, the residence of one of its members and later was housed in 120 Safalya Building, Curry Road, Lower Parel. A demonstration was held by the Forum Against Rape as part of its Women’s Day celebrations on 7 March 1990 and was carried out from Azad Maidan to the Hutatma Chowk in Mumbai.

### 9.3. The Early Years of Forum

In 1981, the organisation saw some members leave to form other groups. At this time there were discussions about the formation of a federation, whether the organisation should restrict itself to grass root level work and the pros and cons of registration of the organisation and the institution of formal membership. Some felt that registration would ‘kill the spontaneity’ of the organisation, while others held that registration would result in ‘recognition’ by police and other organisations that the Forum interacted with. After much debate, the Forum ‘voted’ to stay an informal group with ‘a larger vision and scope’ as domestic violence, dowry deaths, etc. (Forum 1990: 5), were added as issues of
concern for the organisation. Accordingly, the name was changed from Forum Against Rape to Forum Against Oppression of Women (Forum 1990: 2).

In the earlier avatar of the organisation, namely, the Forum Against Rape, there were about 40 members and, in the first few meetings that were held, the collective opinion of the members was to function without a hierarchy. The primary reason for this was to give everyone a chance to take up a variety of issues and tasks without any centralized leadership. The group felt this necessary for the ‘open’ spirit of the Forum. In the early years of the anti-rape campaign, all those involved were often called ‘radical feminists’ by local Marxist-Leninist groups who had chosen to stay out of the campaign, and even accused it of being ‘anti-male’ and ‘revolutionist’ (Gandhi and Shah 1991: 27). However, there were fundamental differences between the ideologies of the Forum and radical feminism (ibid.). In April 1983, some members of FAOW who had grown tired of the ‘ad-hocism’ of the organisation began moving for a formalisation of the group into a federation which involved representatives and voting rights. The majority, however, rejected this proposal and it was felt that FAOW was an agitational group and should remain open to anyone who wanted to be part of the group and was willing to work as a collective (ibid.: 288).

9.4. Forum’s Experience with Non-hierarchy

Non-hierarchy as an organising principle has worked well for the Forum, which has stood the test of time and has been active for three decades now. It has often, however, faced struggles due to limited volunteers. Limited volunteers, has naturally meant an overburden of responsibility and work on a few. But, every time the organisation managed to pull through troubled times, it has in many ways added strength to the organisation as well. Today, there are only 12 to 15 regular members who attend the weekly meetings that are usually held on Fridays. Sometimes, the meeting day is shifted to suit the convenience of members and sometimes there are additional meetings during certain campaigns. The regular members of the Forum come from different walks of life, but, by and large, ‘most members are well educated and are working in different fields like teaching, IT, NGO work, research, film making or are students’, according to Nandita Gandhi (in e-mail response). Asked if members have been seekers of assistance
who have stayed on to assist the organisation, Nandita Gandhi said that ‘in Forum’s history some members did come for counselling assistance but that has not been the norm’ (ibid.).

9.5 Some Priorities and Responses of Forum

The activities of the organisation include campaigns, research and organisation of dialogues within and outside the movement both at the city level and at the national level. The issues covered include rape, sexual violence, dowry murders, obscene posters and sexist advertisements. The Forum supported working women, debated the uniform civil code and participated in other campaigns like housing, injectable contraceptives and amniocentesis tests. The Forum organised the ‘guarding’ of women from sexual harassment in train compartments, poster campaigns on issues, campaigned against sexist films and even put up posters in trains on issues that Forum was concerned about. As reported in the booklet (Forum 1990: 2), around 1986, the organisation felt that there were some issues that they had not had success with, such as campaign against communalism, working with the police and courts, and, most importantly, it felt that it had not been able to ‘streamline or change (our) functioning patterns’ (ibid.).

In celebration of the International Women’s Day every year, FAOW organised public meetings and morchas on issues of concern. In 1987, however, a programme with a difference – Train to Women’s Day – was planned on 4 March. Posters were put up, songs sung and pamphlets distributed over three days to women inside the women’s compartments on local trains in Bombay, thus reaching out to a wider and varied audience. The reactions from the public to this was, as can be expected, diverse. Other campaigns include work on women’s right to both her parental and matrimonial property, as denial to shelter left her ‘homeless’. The organisation also promoted the introduction of part-time jobs and home-based work for women. Like in the case of Bailancho Saad, with members from varied background and with a variety of skills and interests, a mosaic of various activities and approaches to issues were possible.

On reflecting on its work after its completion of 10 years, the organisation celebrated its efforts and achievements despite all the odds such as no funding, no paid staff and severe criticism from society. The Forum acknowledged that the organisation
may not have always been effective, but it celebrated the very formation and evolution of the group into one ‘unafraid of taking new issues, organising demonstrations and alliances’ (ibid.), a group that has become, through the processes adopted, ‘a much closer group which tries to take care of each other and women’ (ibid.). About her initial involvement with the Forum, Nandita Gandhi writes,

The most tangible influence on any life was the politically turbulent period of the 1970’s. As a student, I encountered others who had rejected the mainstream political ideologies and had turned to alternative development and grassroots organising….The Forum Against Rape (now called the Forum Against the Oppression of Women) was a total organisational and ideological shock for me. There was no differentiation between us, the members, and other women or the oppressed, each one mobilized herself to do whatever we could and we sympathetically encouraged each other to live our feminism with whatever compromises we had to make (Gandhi and Shah 1991: 2-3).

Collective functioning can be an extremely demanding and exacting process. It forces one to continuously deconstruct one’s own power feelings and create condition for equality … Time, skill, and responsibilities also give power … Sometimes the problem was not us as much as others … people – including women’s groups – would often automatically ascribe leadership to one of us (ibid.: 8).

As mentioned earlier, the Forum did at one stage, in the early years, consider the possibility of registration, but chose to remain as a spontaneous collective. At times it was feared, however, that the informal structure might result in a few vocal and more articulate women dominating the discussions. Clearly, rejecting the idea of registration, the group drew up a constitution with the objective to evolve a ‘new structure more suited to us, our work and members’ (Forum 1990: 52). About its decision not to register, the Forum writes: ‘The Forum could not take funds from either the State or funding agencies. Nor did we want to. Our only source of funds have been donations from members and other individuals’ (ibid.: 53). Forum was thus able to retain its independence and was at no time under threat of being co-opted by the state. It was thus able to get involved in campaigns that did not have mass support and also use strategies that were not necessarily socially acceptable, like blackening the face of the accused involved in sexual harassment (ibid.: 53). The Forum viewed the introduction of paid staff into the organisation as one that would bring in a difference between ‘full-timers’ and
‘volunteers’. On the subject of dual membership, the organisation held that there was ‘no exclusion of any woman from whichever part of the world, whichever group she may come from. A genuine lack of caste/class/political/religious bias and a true spirit of cosmopolitanism is something even the most ardent critics of the FAOW have appreciated’ (FAOW 1985).

In discussing its ‘non-formalisation’, the Forum mentions the fears of the group falling into a rhythm of casualness, inaction and inefficiency which from its real experience, however, was never the case. The commitment from the group members itself assured a level of responsibility to tasks and a collective accountability to group decisions. There was no pressure from any external agency or from other group members. One of the limitations posed by campaign work, according to the Forum, was that it seldom got a feedback from the community and often it would lose contact with the groups that were involved in the campaigns.

Moving...but not quite there, a 55-page booklet brought out by Forum in 1990, contains notes on the work and experiences of Forum from 1979 to 1990, and is an attempt at a documentation of the organisation. In this next section, we will look at some of the issues taken up by the Forum as documented in this booklet.

9.6. A brief ‘Outcome Analysis’ of the Forum: Some Issues and Campaigns

Here we try to briefly show using examples that an ‘outcome analysis’ can be done to evaluate the work of the Forum. However, for the study of this organisation, detailed information, as in the case study of Bailancho Saad, was not available. Therefore, only single case examples are used to discuss the (a) political and policy outcomes, (b) cultural outcomes, (d) personal or self development outcomes and (e) mobilization outcomes.

9.6.1. Political Outcomes

One of the most successful campaigns in this country has been the campaign against rape initiated by the Forum Against Rape and the continuing work towards reform of the rape law by Forum. ‘Through leaflets, posters and public meetings, the
women’s groups tried to breakdown the existing myths about rape. Through sustained
grass-root level work, we tried to investigate rape cases, organize protests and provide
support to individual victims’ (Forum 1990: 5) and ‘… although none of us had ever been
raped, we had personally experienced some form of gender inequality and discrimination’
(ibid.). There were, however, many issues regarding the handling of rape cases and
treatment of rape victims that had never before been addressed in India. The importance
of concealing the identity of the rape victim in the media and the importance of obtaining
the victim’s consent before the case was taken up by the campaign are examples. The
introduction of the amendment to the rape law that shifted, in custodial rape cases, the
onus of proof of consent from the prosecution to the accused was one of the successes of
the campaign. Some of the problems encountered by the organisation in the early years of
the campaign were (a) the victim is often pressured by her family to withdraw her
statement in court, (b) the police refuse to register a complaint if there was no penis
penetration, even if iron rods had been forcibly inserted into the victim, (c) the victim and
her family fear further harassment and life threats if they pursue rape charges, (d) it is
often difficult to obtain community support for the victim, (e) sustaining the follow up of
the cases was difficult, (f) the procedure of registration of rape was laborious and often
caused further trauma to the victim, and (g) the society was often critical about the
victims character and morality (ibid.: 7-8).

The Forum gradually shifted its focus from demanding for amendment to the law
to amendment of the procedures of handling cases of rape such as the need for speedy
rape trials, procedures that would not humiliate the victim, inclusion of marital rape
which was earlier not even considered as rape, tackling social stigma regarding rape and,
most of all, the support to victims who could be of any class, caste or age. The change in
attitude of police, service providers, the press and the judiciary in cases of rape and in the
treatment of rape victims has changed over the last two decades and much is owing to the
contribution of Forum.

9.6.2. Cultural Outcomes

One of the issues concerning women’s rights, that was taken up by the Forum,
was the common custom of a woman adopting her husband’s name after marriage and
children, the father’s. This was an issue taken up following experiences of its members – *Surname Campaign*. Exclusion of women as ‘natural guardians’ of their children was also taken up. This campaign met with some success: in many schools the mother’s name is included in application forms, a child’s passport today respects both names of the father and the mother and does not require the 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 did not change their maiden names, to operate bank accounts with their children as their natural guardians.

9.6.3. Personal/Self Development Outcomes

As already mentioned above, one of the activities of Forum was to attempt at providing women security from sexual abuse in train compartments after 8 p.m. in the city of Mumbai as it was reported that men then take over women’s compartments, ‘occupy the seats, block the entrances, pass obscene remarks, sing sexists songs and make traveling a nightmare for the women’ (Forum 1990: 3). A survey conducted in May 1982 revealed that most women commuters had experienced some sort of abuse on the train, but were scared to protest alone. On 19 June 1982, 30 women staged a demonstration outside the Railway General Manager’s office, but he said that this was a ‘law and order problem’ and not in his jurisdiction.

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 pm 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 traveling individually on days when the campaign was not on, were beaten up by men who recognized their faces. So we felt that we better proceed to the next stage of holding a joint meeting with railway and police authorities (Forum 1990: 4).

The joint meeting eventually resulted in a promise to post 50 men to guard the trains. 250 men were fined in one night for traveling in the ladies compartment. Looking back at this campaign, the Forum has described the guarding of the compartments as ‘tiresome and dangerous’ and yet ‘the most rewarding’ (ibid.: 3). ‘Individually we have successfully
fought against our fear of traveling alone late in the night. (We would reach home well after midnight!). On the long journey back into the city …we got to know each other better and this has strengthened us as a Forum’ (ibid.: 4). The collective assertion of rights results in individual empowerment through strength gained from the lived experience.

9.6.4. Mobilization Outcomes

The success of the campaign against rape and the impact it had on the birth of new organisations, including the Forum and the movement for Gay Rights, is testimony of the mobilization outcome of the collective experience. Today many of the Forum members are involved in the organisation of the ‘Queer Azadi’ or the Gay Parade held in Mumbai in 2008 and 2009. This testifies 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.

9.7. Work on Domestic Violence: Change in Organisation Structure

While FAOW primarily came together on the issue of rape, rape continued to remain an ‘external issue’, which was ‘happening to others out there’ while domestic violence seemed so universal and the incidence so high that it compelled the organisation to respond to this issue as well. ‘Our own mothers, sisters, friends and in some cases we ourselves were facing violence within marriage. So we had no choice but to respond to this issue’ (Forum 1990: 17). However, the organisation faced a dilemma in certain cases where they suspected that the organisation’s support was being used merely for ‘private revenge’ against the family of the accused, rather than for work towards prevention of domestic violence. In several cases the organisation’s intervention was sought only after the victim was dead as in the case of dowry deaths. However, there were voices raised from within the communities that the organisation worked in about the possibilities of prevention of oppression.

At this time in the life of FAOW it was felt that, for more ‘sustained follow-up work’ with cases of domestic violence, it would require an office, a permanent address
and full time workers (ibid.: 18). It was also felt that victim’s voices are often lost in the hum of the usual meetings. This then raised questions about the appropriateness of the non-hierarchical structure of the Forum, particularly in providing support to women in distress. It was felt that the ‘broad based and open’ structure suited Forum’s agitational work, but not necessarily appropriate for support services. This resulted in the establishment of the Women’s Centre, a support centre for battered women in Bombay in September 1981 in a house that belonged to one of the Forum members, as the office, and the employment of full-time workers.

The Forum would take on all campaigns and agitational work, while the Women’s Centre would handle individual cases that required support and counselling. The functions of the Forum and the Women’s Centre were made distinctly different in definition while being ‘complimentary’ at the same time. The Women’s Centre depended largely on the broad-based Forum, whose members cut across a wide spectrum of people including students and journalists working on a variety of issues. This decision of FAOW to get involved in case work did raise larger questions for the organisation about the very activity, which some members considered to be ‘reformist’ in nature rather than ‘political’. This is a dilemma faced by several women’s groups across the country, namely, the questions surrounding the relationship between consciousness raising and individual support. Was it social work/welfare or did it contribute to the eventual empowerment of women? Was involvement in one activity at the cost of the other or were they part of the same empowerment process? This was a much debated topic at the National seminar held at Shreemati Nathibai Damodar Thackersey Women’s University (SNDT), Bombay in 1985 on ‘A Decade of Women’s Movement in India’ which brought together women from different parts of the country. The other issues that were raised were dependency and bridging the gap between the seekers of assistance and the providers of assistance, thereby also levelling the hierarchical relationship that might be formed.

The assistance extended by the Forum to individual victims of domestic violence ranged from providing shelter in the homes of members in the initial years to finding jobs, identifying training programmes, confronting the abuser as well as referring the
victim to another agency of the state or a lawyer for assistance as done in more recent years.

9.8. Collaborating with other Organisations

The Campaign against Amniocentesis (Sex Determination and Sex Pre-selection) was one such cause that saw FAOW collaborating with the Forum Against Sex Determination and Sex Pre-selection (FASDSP) as early as 1985. A morcha of parents with their daughters was held on Children’s Day (14 November 1986) which not only condemned the test but also attacked the discriminating social customs and the son preference. Then, in April 1988, a 15-day Yatra titled ‘Nari Jivan Sangarsh’ was held through the city of Bombay, together with other women’s groups and voluntary organisations.

9.9. Forum’s Relationship with the State

One of the reasons for the Forum’s decision not to register itself as a formal organisation was to retain its independence from state control. However, its work on legal reform often landed them in a dilemma:

Our relationship with the State has been a controversial one. As a women’s group we have had to encounter the state and its machinery in almost every action or campaign. Mostly it has been a tight rope walk between making demands from a state and yet establishing and protesting against its oppressive and patriarchal nature (ibid.: 33).

In its work on law reform, however, the Forum often held that its own demands for stringent punishment for offences like rape, for example, meant that it was also demanding greater state control. Aware of these limitations of its work in campaigning for legal reform, the Forum held that

we still think that it serves as a consciousness raising experience and forum for public debate. Secondly, we think that legal struggles should also be aimed at re-structuring and improving the long and complicated court procedures. Thirdly, we need to evolve our perspective on law and the legal system (ibid.: 34).

According to the Forum,
The problem then is not only with the law itself, or the court procedures but also with its interpreters. Demonstrations before courts, filing for revisions and critiques of judgments continue to be our strategy. The only bright spot has been the introduction of public interest litigation (ibid.).

Due to the increase in the number of rapes in police custody, the Forum was forced to interact with the police and even collaborate with them on projects like the ‘HELP’, a special cell for women-in-distress project which was initiated by the Police Commissioner. This project had six women’s organisations assisting in running the special cell, recording statements of victims and being on call all 24 hours! The experience of Forum in this project was not positive. When Forum members began following up cases or highlighting ‘discrepancies in police records’, the project was wound up. It was clear they were being ‘used’ by the state. According to the Forum,

We felt that our energies were being co-opted by it without any corresponding gains or strength being made available to women. The state machinery of course tried to acquire a cleaner and pro-women face in the process (ibid.: 35).

**Saheli: Pioneer Women’s Activist Organisation in India**

‘QUESTION AUTHORITY!’

– Saheli sticker on office cabinet

**9.10. About Saheli**

Saheli started in 1981, five years before Bailancho Saad came into existence, and was a Registered Society unlike Bailancho Saad. Although for the purpose of registration it listed members as Chairperson, Secretary and Treasurer, it, since inception was in reality a collective set up with a conscious decision to preserve the feminist principles of equality, consensus and participation in its decision making processes, and to value each person’s experience. Saheli’s beginnings were in a garage attached to the home of one of its members. Managing solely on voluntary efforts in the initial years, Saheli struggled to keep the office open the whole day, for six days a week. ‘Saheli did not want to replicate hierarchical structures and traditional leadership based on the authority of one person or “head” (Saheli 2006: 85). In Saheli’s own words, it was one of the ‘earliest women’s
spaces in the country, started in an era when women’s spaces were pretty much only meant to be in the home’ (ibid.: 5). Like Bailancho Saad, reaching out to women victims of domestic violence was one of the main goals of the organisation at the time of its inception. In the aftermath of Emergency, several women’s groups were established. A large number of these were started by women who had some earlier affiliation to Left or socialist parties, but had felt either marginalized within their party or that there was insufficient attention given to women’s issues by the party to which they belonged. It was in this socio-political environment that Saheli was started. Saheli was inspired by the ‘militant women’s resistance’ that the Forum’s campaign against rape had spread all over the country. For Saheli, therefore, the ‘impetus was to link (our) individual and collective struggles with the emancipation of women across the world’ (ibid.: 7).

Because Saheli is small it can work consistently and has been able to build a reputation for quality… Because it does voluntary work done in time not spent making livelihoods, it cannot be everywhere all the time and must pick and choose its interventions. Because it maintains a radical politics, it will not find millions of partners and friends. Because it does not hesitate to criticize, it may lose a few too! … and I, for one, would not like it any different (Vandana Prasad quoted in ibid.: 81).

9.11. Membership

In Saheli, any woman could become a ‘member’ after volunteering her time with the organisation for six months. Being accepted as a member meant that one had a key to the office, access to all Saheli records and correspondence, and that one was a part of the decision-making process of the organisation at its Wednesday evening meetings. Many of the members of Saheli, like in the case of Bailancho Saad have had affiliations with other groups such as – democratic rights organisations, organisations for displaced people, etc. but affirm the work and politics of Saheli. Like Bailancho Saad, Saheli too was concerned about the more subtle hierarchies, inevitable because of the varied socio-economic and educational backgrounds of its members.

How does a group that values diversity and difference ‘orient’ newcomers to its issues and beliefs, without ‘inducting’ them? How do you share the benefits of age and experience, without re-asserting their hierarchies? How do you infuse these new
relationships with the same spirit of collectivism, as opposed to building a cadre? (Saheli 2006: 80)

Saheli collected a token membership fee of Rs. 2.00 per month. Although the organisation started solely on ‘volunteer-power’, in the first decade of its existence it had experimented with full-time and part-time paid workers as there was a lot of pressure on volunteers with the mounting work-load of cases and campaign work. In the late 1980s – early 1990s, Saheli decided to stop handling individual cases and to concentrate its energies on campaign work. This period is referred to by Sahelis as the ‘split’ as it resulted in stormy debates and saw many members leaving the organisation as they felt case-work was a necessary intervention. Today, the composition of Saheli has changed substantially and the concern for Saheli is the ‘homogeneity of our class and caste composition, and fear that this is distancing us further from the lives of other women’ (ibid.: 81). Saheli now meets once a week on Saturdays. Saheli has many men who are supporters of the organisation because of their own politics aligning with that of Saheli, although they are aware that is a space for women.

9.12. Funding

Although Saheli had got clearance under the Foreign Currency Regulation Act (FCRA) to receive funding from abroad, Saheli’s funding policy was that it would accept only small funding from individual donors and was opposed to accepting institutionalised funds. Further, it preferred domestic funding to foreign funding sources. In the early years, its donations ranged from Rs. 2.00 to Rs. 100.00. Saheli did in the beginning accept donations for advertisements that it carried in its souvenirs/brochures printed for programmes but after 2004, it was decided that it would not seek sponsors or advertisements for even programmes or souvenirs.

… being free of the constraints of funded projects helps us remain autonomous and nurture the creativity and spontaneity that becomes the first casualty of institutionalised funding (ibid.: 9).
9.13. The Autonomous Politics of Saheli

Having experimented with different methods of functioning, Saheli had anticipated the problems that money would bring for the organisation, be it the politics of large funding or the issues that paid workers would pose as opposed to voluntarism. Saheli did not want to expand the organisation though its outreach was vast. For Saheli, autonomy meant freedom from ‘government, male structures, funding, political parties, etc’. In the silver jubilee report, it states ‘… 25 years later, we are still a small feminist group (small and strident some say!), still staunchly non-funded by any institution and still autonomous of any political party’ (ibid.: 5); ‘being free of the constraints of funded projects helps us remain autonomous and nurture the creativity and spontaneity that becomes the first casualty of institutional funding’ (ibid.: 9). Saheli held the opinion that receiving large funding from donor agencies was in many ways relinquishing one’s autonomy as the agenda then of the movement would be directed by those agencies. ‘Initially we made use of government funds for running our short stay home, but found the attitude of the government far from satisfactory…There was a keen desire on their part to supervise our work rather than support it. So we stopped taking funds’ (Gandhi and Shah 1992:302). In 1988, Saheli managed to raise Rs.100,000 by way of a cultural show and through the sale of brochures. Yet the organisation has not stood still and like Bailancho Saad has seen many changes. ‘Most of our names have changed over time, as have some of the issues that concern us, the work we do, how we do it, who we join forces with and of course, the ways in which we express our frustration, share our sorrows and celebrate our togetherness’ (ibid.: 5).

Saheli, unlike Bailancho Saad and even more so than the Forum, has had a ‘consistent and deep engagement with processes based on autonomous politics’ (ibid.: 9) and has been very analytical and critical of its own organisation structure and processes:

In Saheli, the organisational processes we follow and the practices that continue to evolve over time are characterized by a healthy and sustained rejection of any one-up (wo)manship. Dealing with a diversity of views within the group has been both absorbing and enriching instead of a rigid manifesto, or a ‘stand’ advocated by one person and imposed upon the rest of the group (ibid.).
Saheli does not claim to be ‘structureless’ and has experimented over the years with core-groups, sub-groups and co-ordinators. In the first few years of its inception there were discussions about whether or not members should hold dual membership, that is, be a member of Saheli and some other organisation at the same time. Some members felt that the ideology and goals of the other organisations might come into conflict with that of Saheli. ‘Some of the older members saw no contradiction in having dual membership in Saheli and in other groups because Saheli was an open organisation and also because they felt their work in other groups aided rather than hindered Saheli’s functioning’ (Gandhi and Shah 1992: 289). However, after much debate on the issue, it was decided that no member of Saheli could have dual membership. This prompted several members to leave the group.


Saheli has had a complex and dynamic relationship with the concept of ‘power’, Having experienced the oppressive face of power, most Sahelis could not see a positive side to power itself and would ‘shy away from power and leadership as they are conventionally defined’ (Saheli 2006: 86). The notion of power itself has been a much debated topic within the organisation, from the point of view of its emergence from differences in caste, class, socio-cultural background, education or skills both within the organisation and in its work in society. Apart from this there were always new sources of power that could possibly build hierarchies within the group such as the duration of the members affiliation to Saheli, her access to information and other organisations, the public attention to some members through television interviews, by-lines in articles, etc.

To be able to function smoothly as well as hold on to its democratic politics, Saheli was compelled to form ‘Core Groups’ or *Chinta Groups* and rotating co-ordinators (since 2000), just as Bailancho Saad did with ‘temporary specialists’. This core group was not always a volunteered position, as members often had to be coerced into the core groups. This introduction met with varied responses from the group; some saw it conflicting with collective ideology; some felt it was building hierarchies; some questioned if there was in fact a feminist notion of leadership. As this was a much debated subject, the consensus was that leadership in Saheli was,
Taking initiative, having an overall idea about the perspective, work and functioning of Saheli, the ability to take decisions – on her own as well as in consultative processes of decision making, co-ordinating among members, being in constant touch, inspiring others, encouraging and sometimes persuading others to give inputs, being more answerable/accountable and thus filling in the gaps left by others (ibid.: 93)

9.15. Priorities and Responses of Saheli

We have worked with women’s organisations, health groups, women’s wings of Left parties, mass based organisations and NGOs from the very beginning of our campaigns. Many individuals have contributed greatly, with their medical, legal or artistic skills. Simplifying technical information and reaching out with our posters, pamphlets, reports and dossiers, in accessible language and inexpensive publications, has enabled us to share our perspectives with a wide range of groups. In rallies, demonstrations and storming into daunting domains like the WHO and ICMR, or press conferences of pharmaceutical companies, allying with like-minded groups has been our strength. In networks – both national and international, we have thrashed out issues, lobbied and protested… for jointly, we are stronger, we are formidable (Saheli 2006: 54).

Saheli has been known as both a campaign group and a crisis centre. It has been involved with diverse issues ranging from rape, reproductive health and invasive technology, domestic violence, dowry murders, sexual assault, the ‘commodification’ of women in advertising, sex determination tests, sexual minority rights, discriminatory religious personal laws, sati and other oppressive customs and economic policies. Following the riots of November 1984, which resulted in violence against Sikhs, after the assassination of the Prime Minister Indira Gandhi by her body guard who was Sikh, Saheli was involved in relief and rehabilitation with Sikh survivors. The issues were varied and Saheli’s policy was to create awareness of these issues through articles and wide circulation of low cost publications.

The newsletters of Saheli do not carry any writer’s by-lines so as not to neglect the contribution of the whole Saheli team some of whom might have contributed in terms of typing, editing, proof-reading, translating or even mailing of the newsletter. This is in keeping with its policy to function as a collective. This ability of the organisation to bring
out time-bound publications within the stipulated period without a formal structure is commendable.

The professed aim of the collective is to break these divisions and share work equally among the members. Instead, this often leads to problems: tasks are not completed on time, correspondence may or may not be prompt, and, occasionally, someone takes charge and pulls up everyone when the level of disorganisation gets unbearable (Saheli 1985a: no page number).

Unlike Saheli, Bailancho Saad was closely involved with Government initiatives for women and one such example is the State Commission for Women. Members of Bailancho Saad were appointed by the Government of Goa to draw up the Goa State Commission for Women Bill in 1995 and a member was even appointed on the Goa State Commission for Women in its very first term. Saheli, on the contrary, considered maintaining a critical distance from state bodies like the Commission for Women or the Department of Women and Child Development, without ‘being painted into a corner’ as an important part of its politics and autonomy. Saheli also stayed out of the Beijing conference and several other international networks which Bailancho Saad saw as being crucial for building links for their larger cause (see Chapter 5). Saheli, however, got better known in the initial years for its support to individual women (Saheli 1988).

Funding in organisations such as Bailancho Saad, Forum and Saheli poses a serious dilemma as its is often a battle for survival versus the ideological position of autonomy. For any movement or organisation, there has to be a clear policy on the generation and utilization of funds. Funds from government sources are often viewed as tax-payer’s money and, therefore, an acceptable source. According to Gandhi and Shah (1992: 301) ‘groups think it is not only their right but also their duty to get State funds and supervise the implementation of the State’s welfare schemes’. Further, they opine that ‘groups which still function as collectives have not only restructured themselves but revised their expectations and concepts without abandoning the broader goals of collectivism’ (ibid.: 297).

The efforts at this ‘alternative’ collective organising was an uphill slope for most groups. There were phases in the lives of all three organisations when it was felt that there was a need to officially register itself, seek accommodation and streamline its functioning, etc.
Actualising an alternative decentralized structure has been a slow and difficult process marked by unanticipated problems, interminable debates and some painful splits. Some groups have returned to hierarchical forms and others have re-structured themselves (ibid.).

However, ‘inspite of all their problems and dilemmas, women’s collective organisations have had an impact in as much as they have initiated a democratization process in mass and other organisations’ (ibid.: 296).

There is little understanding of the concepts of hierarchy and authority. Often, coordination by an individual is mistaken for authoritarian behaviour. Accountability as well as responsibility is mistaken for hierarchy. Disciplining by a group is seen as curtailment of individual initiate. Formal structures and processes are avoided, either they are not established at all or there is a definite hesitation to use them even on democratic principles (Saheli, 1985a: no page number).

According to Gandhi and Shah,

For decision-making to be truly collective and equal, it seems that not only is a common background of skills, political experience and time a prerequisite, but also respect and value for each other’s views which overcomes the various differences between women and encourages each to be fully involved in the group and its processes (1992: 294).

The work of Saheli over the last 25 years has included battling

‘… court cases, public hearings, joint Parliamentary Committees, Lok Sabha Questions, lobbying with MPs, press statements, writing numerous articles, letters to ICMR, MOHFW, Drugs Controller, NCW, networking with groups in India and abroad, posing as decoy patients, storming meetings, seminars, signature campaigns, producing documents, performing plays, singing songs, distributing parchas, leaflets, posters, sitting on dharnas, marching in rallies …’ (ibid.: 50).

9.16. An Outcome Analysis of Saheli: Some Issues and Campaigns

It must be mentioned here, as in the case of Forum, a detailed outcome analysis will not be possible. However, a few examples of issues will be dealt with to illustrate that such an analysis can be done.
9.16.1. Political/Policy Outcomes

Saheli, the pioneer women’s activist organisation in India, took up the challenge to tackle the complex issue of domestic violence even at a time when the majority opinion was that it was a ‘private’ matter which ought not to have outside intervention. The police at that time also held the opinion that domestic violence was not under their purview, probably because of the fact that it was so widespread and was dealt with as a fact of life that women had to undergo silently. Saheli challenged these opinions with a concerted campaign against it as well as through the provision of support to individual victims. Saheli’s work has proved fruitful in the fact that today we have a legislation, the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act 2005, which is a recognition of the importance of the issue of domestic violence. Saheli has also been successful in lobbying to get questions raised in Parliament.

After the 1984 riots in Delhi, when the organisation got deeply involved in relief work, the Central Government approached Saheli to start a training centre for the riot victims. The organisation was even asked by the Ministry of Human Resource Development to collaborate with them for the printing and distribution of posters on the oppression of women.

Another example can be drawn from Saheli’s work against hazardous contraceptives. The organisation lobbied for ‘informed consent’ and the enforcement of ethical guidelines to be followed by the contraceptive trials. This pressure from the women’s movement compelled the Indian Council for Medical Research (ICMR) to revise its guidelines in 2000 and the ‘notion of accountability and individual patient’s rights has begun to be accepted, albeit reluctantly’ (ibid.: 51).

9.16.2. Cultural Outcomes

Like Bailancho Saad, Saheli went through a period when it was seen by society as being responsible for breaking up the home and family with its radical politics and its hard stand against violence against women. However, having impacted positively on the lives of countless women, the society began acknowledging its work which was dedicated to the cause of women’s empowerment. In 2004, Saheli was approached by the
Women’s Studies programme at the Mahatma Gandhi International Hindi University in Wardha to design a course on ‘Women and Health’.

9.16.3. Personal/Self Development Outcomes

The collective processes adopted by Saheli have helped the group grow and develop its understanding of issues and likewise also its positions on some of the issues. ‘Saheli shaped me up. And I am still in that shape’ (Divya quoted in Saheli 2006: 75). On the issue of domestic violence, for example, from the initial fire-fighting with individual cases, the organisation through discussions and debates made possible with the organisation style, developed its understanding of the correlation domestic violence and other forms of oppression and manifestations of the patriarchal mindset. Besides, like in the case of Bailancho Saad, the organisation served as a support group and a source of strength to other members. Ashima, Saheli’s first ever ‘case’ is quoted in the 25 years of Continuity and Change (ibid.: 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 stated ‘I remember the deep sense of relief and ‘de-alienation’ as a young women to find a common voice and to be able to work on issues that seemed so integral to my growing consciousness …’ (ibid.: 75).

The practice of rotating co-ordinatorship particularly gave individuals a chance to experience leadership even though it at times was forced onto members (ibid.: 93).

9.16.4. Mobilization Outcomes

Saheli being one of the first women’s activist organisations of its kind in India has had many women come and go, be part of Saheli’s active core group, be at the receiving end of Saheli’s support, etc. Whatever, the motivation for ones association with Saheli, what was learnt by the group from the exercise carried out before 2006, on being a Saheli, was that ‘Once a Saheli, Always a Saheli’. Even members who had not been regular at meetings or programmes, when asked why they had left Saheli responded “Who said I’ve left Saheli?” (ibid.: 75). Like in the case of Bailancho Saad, the outcome of both the process and the ideology of the organisation is invariably that it gets so well assimilated into the lives of the members that, even if they move on to other
organisations, these members carry with them some of the energy that has been collectively gained. Saheli has touched the lives of countless women and has impacted other social movements as well.

Times change, individuals are different, and the needs of the group also alter over time. Each response has been accompanied by much soul searching and discussions, sometimes to the point of paralysis. Yet, giving up the goal of collective functioning would be like giving up a dream (ibid.: 93).

9.17. Collective Energy

What is evident through this discussion about the three collectives, Forum, Saheli and Bailancho Saad is that women often feel a level of comfort with this form of organising. Although it might be a unique style of functioning given the aims, objectives and activities of such groups, the fact that there have been similar experiences in three different states in India also speaks of the strengths of this organisation style that could be experimented with by other movements as well. The Forum, it could be said, 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.

It was the pervasive violence against women that led to the formation of these collectives that sought to counter this oppression, discrimination and injustice that women experience. The women’s movements have been successful in naming ‘patriarchy’ and ‘power dynamics between the sexes’ as the cause of women’s oppression and discrimination. To a very large extent they have been successful in building up a resistance to the diverse forms of oppression through diverse forms of action. The collectives were built on a sisterhood of women with similar lived experiences and a belief that strength could be created in this unity.

While campaign work formed a major part of the agenda of all three groups, service or outreach was seen to be equally important component for the organisation. When a movement goes beyond the immediate cause to intervention that may not be time-bound, the collectives face the hurdles that come with voluntarism. Any intervention that requires a longer commitment from members will be difficult to sustain if the period
for which the intervention is required is not definable. All three organisations were faced with the similar dilemma due to the limits of voluntary work and the problems that paid staff would pose to their ideology, which was ‘against hierarchy’.

All the collectives celebrated their independence and, therefore, did not seek formal, institutional funding. They saw the organisation’s autonomy linked to individual independence, freedom and justice.