

SOCIAL CONFLICT ON THE FRONT LINES OF REFORM: INSTITUTIONAL ACTIVISM AND GIRLS' EDUCATION IN RURAL INDIA

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Abstract:

How do states realize social reforms for marginalized groups in settings of entrenched inequality? This paper argues that reform implementation is a conflict-ridden process driven by the institutional activism of street-level bureaucrats. Through an ethnographic case study of Mahila Samkhya, a novel government program for women's empowerment in Uttar Pradesh, India, I find that local fieldworkers committed to reform promoted girls' education by mobilizing marginalized citizens and mediating local conflicts. Organizational processes of gender-based training and deliberation enabled fieldworkers to challenge village patriarchy and exclusion and forge programmatic ties with lower caste women. By altering rules to address the practical needs of households, fieldworkers effectively integrated disadvantaged girls into the education system. Institutional activism also engendered conflicts over rules within the bureaucracy, prompting senior officials to advocate for marginalized groups. The findings suggest the importance of institutional commitment to activism within agencies on the front lines of reform.

Keywords: institutional activism, street-level bureaucracy, social conflict, policy implementation, gender, education, India

1. INTRODUCTION

Social reforms are not simply products of social conflict but can also engender conflict within society. Reform programs can shape the interests, identities and relations of citizens, thereby spawning political action and claims on the state (Kumlin & Stadelmann-Steffen, 2014; Pierson, 1996; Soss, 1999). Yet, far too little is known of how reform programs operate on the ground and achieve their objectives in practice, particularly in settings of entrenched social inequality, where marginalized communities face elite resistance to reform. The absence of strong and effective bureaucracies, reform programs often fall apart during implementing, failing to reach their intended beneficiaries (M. Andrews, Pritchett, & Woolcock, 2017). Where an inclusive civil society is mobilized, marginalized citizens can effectively voice demands for reform (P. Evans & Heller, 2015). However, weak state capacity often combines with divisive ethnic politics to yield narrow, clientelistic exchanges between citizens and the state, dampening the prospects for programmatic reform (Kitschelt & Wilkinson, 2007).

Under these challenging conditions, how do social reforms on behalf of marginalized groups get realized? Drawing on field-based evidence from India, this paper argues that reform implementation depends on the institutional activism of street-level bureaucrats, local agents committed to social causes who possess the authority and discretion to translate reform programs into local practices. By mobilizing marginalized groups, institutional activists challenge traditional norms and hierarchies, while adapting reforms programs to address practical needs, a process rife with social conflict. Institutional activists use their official standing to advocate on behalf of marginalized groups, creating tensions within the state bureaucracy as well. This paper develops these arguments through a case study of a novel program for girls' education in rural Uttar Pradesh, India. A setting of deeply-entrenched gender and caste inequalities, rural UP

occupies a least-likely context for education reforms to succeed, particularly reforms targeting girls from landless, lower caste households. I analyze how Mahila Samakhya—a quasi-government agency for women's empowerment—has effectively integrated disadvantaged girls into the education system through its village-based programming and residential schools. Frontline workers mobilized rural women's associations to challenge exclusionary caste and gender norms, and with their support, adapted girls' education to the needs of marginalized households. This argument builds on prior research, in India and elsewhere, demonstrating the importance of subaltern social mobilization and the constructive role of social conflict for the achievement of social reforms (Ahuja, 2019; Heller, 1999). However, it departs by casting light on the activism of street-level bureaucrats—village fieldworkers, school teachers and local officials—who organize and mediate quotidian conflicts in service of reform.

This paper proceeds as follows. I begin by situating institutional activism in theoretical literature examining how street-level bureaucracies handle the conflicts of policy implementation. I then describe the study's empirical context and ethnographic field methods used for data collection. Next, I present case study findings of Mahila Samakhya's programming in UP, tracing the mechanisms whereby institutional activists implement girls' education reforms. I conclude by discussing the implications of institutional activism for research on local public administration in developing countries.

2. THEORY: INSTITUTIONAL ACTIVISM AND REFORM IMPLEMENTATION

In many parts of the world, social reforms have depended on the bottom-up mobilization of marginalized groups and their conflicts with privileged sections of society. A vast literature on social movements has investigated when and how marginalized citizens get behind social causes

and collectively demand the state to execute reforms (Amenta, Caren, Chiarello, & Su, 2010; K. T. Andrews, 2001; Jenkins, 1983; McCarthy & Zald, 1977). This work has shed light on the possibilities for societal collective action to produce durable social change. In India, studies show how social movements comprised of workers, lower castes, women and other subordinate groups have pressured the state to uphold its promises of dignity and socioeconomic inclusion (Agarwala, 2013; Ahuja, 2019; Heller, 1999; Ray & Katzenstein, 2005). Notwithstanding their importance, the geographic reach of these movements is somewhat limited and their impact on reforms to combat poverty, patriarchy and caste discrimination varies considerably across the country. Where large-scale social movements for marginalized citizens have not materialized, reform implementation is an uphill battle. Under these conditions, I argue, the institutional activism of street-level bureaucrats is critical in making marginalized groups visible to the state and translating reforms into practice.

My argument builds on recent scholarship examining the activist-oriented behavior of bureaucrats (Abers, 2019; Abers & Tatagiba, 2015; Rich, 2013; Santoro & McGuire, 1997). Institutional activists, Abers writes, “[s]truggle daily to discover institutional opportunities and vulnerabilities, to work around rules, and to find the time to organize with each other in defense of ideas they believe in.” (2019, p. 40). These struggles manifest in the ways that institutional activists promote social causes. In Brazil’s health sector, for example, Rich (2013) finds that implementation of AIDS policies depended on initiatives of reform-minded bureaucrats, who mobilized civil society groups in local health campaigns. However, a dense and active civil society is not everywhere available, creating the need for institutional activists to engage more closely with communities. Institutional activists forge ties with marginalized groups and use their official standing to counter inequalities during implementation. In so doing, I argue, institutional

activists become enmeshed in social conflicts that erupt when marginalized citizens assert themselves in the public sphere.

Institutional activism finds theoretical grounding in research that underscores the importance of bureaucratic culture, norms and values (DiIulio, 1994; Kaufman, 1967; Levi & Sherman, 1997; Perry & Wise, 1990). Lipsky (1980) has shown that street-level bureaucrats use discretion to interpret policy rules and manage everyday tensions, suggesting the limits of top-down control. Subsequent studies have examined how bureaucratic discretion operates in different policy contexts and the conflicts it can induce (Brodkin, 1997; Hupe & Hill, 2007; Keiser, 1999; Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2003). Such conflicts are partly a consequence of the policymaking process, which tends to produce ambiguous policy rules (Baier, March, & Saetren, 1986). As lawmakers seek to avoid political challenges in the legislative arena, Lipsky (1984) notes, “hidden conflicts” become manifest in the less visible bureaucratic arena. At the individual level, street-level bureaucrats can face a stark choice between applying the rules uniformly and bending the rules for particular cases (Zacka, 2017). Yet, individual moral judgements are often guided by norms and institutionalized practices, which shape how street-level bureaucrats understand and act on their judgments (Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2012). Individuals motivated by social causes may opt for public service work, but bureaucracies can augment (or dampen) commitment through processes of socialization (Oberfield, 2014). Agencies with a culture of institutional activism can motivate lower-level officials to take on complex social problems and build collaborative ties with society. As Tandler’s (1997) seminal study of high-performing agencies in Brazil shows, mechanisms of selection, training and public recognition can strengthen frontline worker commitment to reforms.

Institutional activism on behalf of marginalized groups also generates contestation and conflict within society. The nature and intensity of conflict depends on the policy context, which includes, *inter alia*, social norms, the design of formal institutions, and the political salience and meanings attached to policy (Grindle, 1980; Matland, 1995). Conflict is more likely in settings of entrenched inequality, especially when reforms challenge prevailing norms and elite domination. In India, for example, conflicts surrounding the changing status of women, lower castes and other marginalized groups is connected to institutional reforms challenging patriarchy and caste discrimination (Ahuja, 2019; Brulé, 2020). By encouraging marginalized groups to mobilize and make demands on the state, institutional activists both induce and mediate social conflict, a recurring but underappreciated aspect of their work. Social conflict has both a *material* dimension, manifesting in the provision of tangible goods and services, as well as a *socio-symbolic* dimension, which points to the meanings, identities and status markers attached to participation in governance (Horowitz, 1985). Institutional activists use the public nature of conflict during implementation to secure material benefits for marginalized citizens but also to bring injustices to light, making the “hidden transcripts” of marginalized citizens public (Scott, 1990). Through quotidian acts of mobilization, marginalized groups claim services from the state as well as dignity from within society (Appadurai, 2002; Kruks-Wisner, 2018).

Institutional activism can be contrasted with the role of political brokers in clientelistic settings, who mediate access to the state (Auyero, 2001; Stokes, Dunning, Nazareno, & Brusco, 2013). India has witnessed the rise of *naya netas*, new leaders linking rural communities with state programs (Krishna, 2003, 2011). Brokers can solve problems and support public goods provision in India's urban slums as well (Auerbach, 2019; Jha, Rao, & Woolcock, 2007). Brokers may be interpreted as part of democratic deepening, enabling subordinate castes to

challenge elite domination of the state (Witsoe, 2012, 2013). Brokerage also has drawbacks, however, as it may exclude certain groups and reinforce inequalities, leaving the poor to grapple with uncertainties of informal access to the state (Krishna, 2011, pp. 111-114). For those lacking the wherewithal to navigate bureaucracies, the local state may remain distant and unresponsive (Ahuja & Chhibber, 2012; Gupta, 2012). In contrast to brokers, institutional activists are backed by formal state authority. The relationship with marginalized groups is less transactional than brokerage and more *institutionalized*, involving a wider scope of administrative activities. Working on behalf of marginalized communities, institutional activists adjust policy rules to address practical needs. By challenging administrative rules and procedures, institutional activists generate conflict inside the bureaucracy as well. An activist orientation runs counter to bureaucracy's customary emphasis on hierarchy and rules. Tensions that arise from having different grammars of administration makes it more challenging for institutional activists to coordinate with other bureaucrats. On the other hand, bureaucratic conflict may serve to inspire and reinforce an activist commitment among street-level bureaucrats.

3. EMPIRICAL CONTEXT AND METHODS

This section advances the above arguments through a case study of girls' education reforms in rural India. I examine the Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalaya (KGBV) initiative, a national program launched in 2004 that aims to integrate adolescent girls who have dropped of school and failed to complete the eighth grade. The program targets socio-economically disadvantaged girls, mainly those who are *Dalit*, or Scheduled Caste (SC), but also girls from other lower caste, Scheduled Tribe (ST) and Muslim backgrounds. Under Indian federalism, legislative authority for education is shared between the central and state governments, the latter

holding primary responsibility for policy implementation. India's Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD) has worked with state governments and external agencies to formulate national programs for the education of rural girls and other disadvantaged children (Mangla, 2018). KGBVs are residential schools that provide schooling, meals and accommodation, along with healthcare and other social services, free of charge. The schools are established in Educationally Backward Blocks, administrative localities with below-average indicators for women's literacy and comparatively high gender disparities. The KGBV program is designed to help students complete the eighth grade and transition to high school.¹

The KGBV programs in Uttar Pradesh examined in this paper were implemented by Mahila Samakhya, a quasi-governmental agency working for women's empowerment. Mahila Samakhya was established by India's central government, following its 1986 National Policy on Education, which highlighted gender imbalances in education. As the policy proclaimed, "The empowerment of women is possibly the most critical pre-condition for the participation of girls and women in the educational process." Mahila Samakhya emerged after consultations between the MHRD, state governments, civil society organizations, international aid agencies and experts on gender and education.² Standard approaches to public administration in India were considered ill-suited to combating gender inequality in the education system, which instead was thought to require "women's empowerment" (*mahila sashaktikaran*).³ Funded by the central government and external agencies, Mahila Samakhya was designed as a hybrid institution, operating with state authority but having the autonomy to manage its own programs and internal affairs. Mahila

¹ The KGBV program was recently extended to cover grades 9-10. See: <http://samagra.mhrd.gov.in/kgbv.html#>.

² On Mahila Samakhya's evolution, see Ramachandran (2014) and Ramachandran and Jandhyala (2014).

³ Interview with member of National Resource Group, Mahila Samakhya, New Delhi, January 2012. On the association between women's empowerment and girls' education in India see Afridi (2010)

Samakhya has a multi-tiered governance structure.⁴ The National Project Office operates under the MHRD in New Delhi, advised by a National Resource Group with expertise in education, health, gender and law. Mahila Samakhya's State Project Office reports to the state-level Department of Education and oversees implementation by district-level teams. After piloting Mahila Samakhya in Gujarat, Karnataka and UP in 1988, the central government extended the program to eleven states.

This study examines Mahila Samakhya in UP (hereafter MSUP), which became operational in 1990.⁵ UP is a least-likely setting for the effective implementation of girls' education reforms (Gerring, 2006). Located in northern India's Hindi Belt, a region with sluggish social indicators, UP performs near the bottom among Indian states in terms of human development (Drèze & Khera, 2012). Literacy and other social indicators for women and children are considerably worse than in other parts of India (*see* Table 1). UP's underperformance in human development has been linked to its entrenched caste and gender inequalities, a lack of political will and weak administrative capacity (Drèze & Sen, 2002; Mehrotra, 2006; Singh, 2016). Notwithstanding the electoral mobilization of UP's lower castes, social movements have not emerged to promote social reforms (Ahuja, 2019). Elections have tended to amplify ethnic divisions and education reform has rarely featured in political platforms (Chandra, 2004; Pai, 2002).

⁴ State-level units of Mahila Samakhya are registered as Autonomous Societies, allowing them to operate independently of state governments.

⁵ MSUP has a field presence in 19 UP districts, covering 77 administrative blocks and 5,853 villages (IIM-A, 2014).

Table 1. Social Indicators for Women and Children in Uttar Pradesh

	Uttar Pradesh	India
Sex ratio (females per thousand males)	912	943
Female literacy rate (%)	57.2	65.5
Gender gap in literacy (%)	20.1	16.7
Women with 10 years or more of schooling (%)	33.2	35.7
Infant Mortality Rate (per 1,000 live births)	64	41
Children under 5 years who are stunted (%)	46.3	38.4

Source: Census of India (2011) and National Family Health Survey-4 (2015).

MSUP operates in underserved villages with a large share of landless and SC households. Within this challenging environment, MSUP has been effective in mobilizing communities for girls' education.⁶ Local news coverage as well as independent evaluations credit MSUP for the performance of its KGBV schools (Saxena & Mehrotra, 2014).⁷ The attention given to the health of girls and their engagement in extracurricular activities suggest relatively high quality services.⁸ These achievements are noteworthy given that KGBV schools cater to the most disadvantaged girls. In their recommendations to the central government, a consortium of preeminent educationists stated, "*There is a need to adopt the gender sensitive approach of Mahila Samakhya to the KGBV schools.*"⁹

⁶ There are 746 KGBV schools in UP, mostly operated by the Department of Education. MSUP run 33 KGBV schools within the state.

⁷ Also see: Tarannum, "Full marks for changing lives," *InfoChange India*, July 2008.

[URL: <http://www.infochangeindia.org/education/181-education/stories-of-change/7207-full-marks-for-changing-lives-.html>]

⁸ Evidenced from author's fieldwork and government reports.

⁹ "National Consortium on Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalaya: A Visionary Initiative," *Department of Women's Studies*, National Council of Education Research and Training, August 11-12, 2008.

This paper's empirical analysis relies on ten months of field research in UP (from 2009-11) using ethnographic field methods. I performed participant observation alongside MSUP fieldworkers to understand and document systematically “what they say” as well as “what they do” (Brodin, 2008, p. 330). I observed MSUP's programming in three districts (Mathura, Saharanpur and Sitapur), covering diverse economic and sociocultural contexts across UP. I joined MSUP fieldworkers on visits to villages and district offices, observing their interactions with women's associations, parents, village leaders and local state officials. I also visited four KGBV schools run by MSUP, where I observed classes, activities and the interactions between MSUP fieldworkers, teachers and parents. Third, I conducted 54 in-depth interviews and 22 focus group discussions (in Hindi), summarized in Table 2. Interviews normally lasted between 60 and 90 minutes. Focus group discussions had 10-12 participants and lasted from 110 to 140 minutes.

Table 2. Summary of Interviews and Focus Group Discussions

Interviews	
MSUP staff	26
UP Dept. of Education officials	5
KGBV school teachers	6
Parents	11
Other village residents	6
<i>Total number</i>	54
Focus Group discussions	
MSUP fieldworkers	13
Women's associations (<i>sanghas</i>)	9
<i>Total number</i>	22

During fieldwork, I was cognizant of my privileged position as an upper caste man. Interviews and focus group discussions with MSUP fieldworkers and women's associations were conducted in public spaces deemed safe and appropriate. I insisted on sitting on the ground with interviewees, though many times they offered me a chair. I was equally attentive to village caste norms (e.g. around the sharing of food) and took steps to signal solidarity with lower castes. Study participants described experiences of patriarchy, casteism and quotidian frustrations with the local state, though the presentation of empirical materials leaves out many particulars. The names of individuals and villages are kept anonymous to protect the identity of study participants.

4. MAHILA SAMAKHYA AND GIRLS' EDUCATION IN UTTAR PRADESH

MSUP's administration of girls' education programming departs from conventional bureaucratic administration in UP, which emphasizes top-down compliance with rules. Instead, MSUP has concentrated on "*the processes and dynamics of patriarchy*" that serve to marginalize and exclude women.¹⁰ Central to this approach is MSUP's grassroots network of women's associations (*mahila sanghas*). *Sanghas* are village-based organizations consisting of women who are mainly landless and *Dalit*, but in some cases including other lower castes and Muslims. In contrast to Self Help Groups (SHGs) focused narrowly on micro-credit, MSUP conceived of *sanghas* as "*pressure groups*" that work to counter discrimination at the intersections of caste and gender. MSUP's "fieldworkers" (*sahayoginis*) are women living near target villages, and in many cases, come from disadvantaged households.¹¹ Fieldworkers oversee a cluster of ten

¹⁰ Interview with senior MSUP official, Lucknow, January 2009.

¹¹ Jandhyala (2014) details Mahila Samakhya's process for creating *sanghas*.

villages, where they support *sanghas* and women's programming in partnership with MSUP district teams, who oversee field activities and coordinate with local administration.

Commitment to MSUP's mission of women's empowerment was fostered by personnel decisions, training and other organizational processes. Alongside education credentials, fieldworkers were required to have communication skills and demonstrated capacity to work with disadvantaged women, identified through the application and interview process.¹² The importance given to communication was evident from everyday meetings, which I attended in the four study districts. These meetings covered different issues and themes but they had a common format. Meetings began with folk songs highlighting women's capabilities. MSUP fieldworkers sat with senior staff members on the floor in a circle, an arrangement that sought to flatten hierarchies and foster discussion irrespective of age and rank. Fieldworkers were encouraged to interrogate MSUP's programs and express disagreements in light of their experiences in villages interacting with *sangha* women. Strategies for lending support to *sangha* women were frequently discussed. District team meetings were similarly arranged during visits by senior MSUP officials stationed in Lucknow, the state capital. Senior officials sat on the floor with district staff and participated in songs and local ceremonies. They gave special attention to fieldworkers and sought the perspectives of *sangha* women as well.

In addition to MSUP's hiring policies, the socialization of fieldworkers (*sahayoginis*) was a transformative process. For most fieldworkers, deliberation was a foreign concept and nearly all (20 out of 21) of those interviewed reporting experiencing the strains of having to "*adjust*" to the practice of group-based discussion. A similar number reported having to acquire new "*habits of speaking*" (*bolne ki aadaten*) and detailed how, through practice, they learned to express

¹² Interview with MSUP officials, Sitapur. Also see Ramachandran (2014, pp. 51-55).

themselves and openly disagree with others. Articulating their own perspectives was among the greatest challenges cited by fieldworkers. The practice of deliberation within MSUP reinforced the agency's mission to help marginalized women assert themselves within their communities, shaping how fieldworkers interacted with *sanghas*. Consider how fieldworkers "entered" rural communities and built ties with disadvantaged women. Putting the larger agenda of women's empowerment to one side, fieldworkers first identified the more immediate needs of rural women. A retired MSUP official explained:

When we first would enter a rural community, we had no agenda. We would just try to understand the system within the community. If we started talking about 'gender,' 'education' and 'rights' they [the village] would throw us out...So we would go there and try to understand the community and its needs first.¹³

The above quote captures how fieldworkers operated in all study districts, though the modes of establishing community ties varied depending on the local context. For example, in Chitrakoot district, fieldworkers accessed women through the prism of the water crisis afflicting the drought-prone Bundelkhand region. Meanwhile, in Bhairach district, where annual flooding posed many problems, fieldworkers worked with women to identify coping strategies. Gradually, they inched towards more controversial topics, such as the discrepancy in agricultural wages earned by women and men. Socially sensitive topics, such as domestic violence and child marriage, were broached only after a trusting relationship was established with *sangha* women.

After several months of establishing ties, fieldworkers connected the various issues raised by women to the mission of improving women's literacy. In the next phase of programming, lasting a year or two, they worked with *sanghas* to create women's literacy centers (*mahila saksharta kendra*) in villages. The literacy centers became public spaces for women and girls to meet outside the restrictive confines of the home and discuss collective needs, such as village

¹³ Interview with former State Project Director, Mahila Samakhya, Lucknow, January 2009.

roads, drinking water and sanitation. As *sanghas* matured, attention was given to more controversial issues, including girls' education and health. *Sanghas* were mobilized to hold school enrollment campaigns and address barriers to student attendance, such as the physical insecurity that lower caste girls experienced when travelling to school. In Saharanpur district, where alcoholism and domestic violence were salient issues, MSUP helped create an informal women's court (*nari adalat*) managed by *sangha* women. The court, as I observed, held regular hearings and made decisions on cases involving women, sometimes in collaboration with the police and village authorities.¹⁴

In the course of their work, MSUP fieldworkers often became enmeshed in village caste conflicts.¹⁵ In focus group discussions, fieldworkers who were SC described the angry glances, insults and threats they received when passing through upper caste hamlets, often from men. Fieldworkers who were upper caste, meanwhile, risked ostracization from their caste communities, as they were seen to violate norms forbidding interaction with lower castes. Fieldworkers reported taking these challenges in stride, and their confidence interacting with village residents was evident from my observations. Nevertheless, caste conflict was not easily overcome, particularly when SC women pressed to be included in matters of village governance. Fieldworkers noted the growing political clout of SCs, evidenced by the electoral rise of the Bahujan Samaj Party in UP, which was in power during my fieldwork. Yet, more than half of fieldworkers interviewed reported cases of backlash from village upper castes, typically in the form of public insults, vandalism and defacing of SC community centers (*samudayak bhawan*). In two separate instances in Mathura district, *sangha* women informed me that human feces were

¹⁴ Interviews and participant observation with MSUP district team, Saharanpur, February – April 2009.

¹⁵ Formerly the “untouchables” of the Hindu caste system, *Dalits* occupy the bottom rung of caste hierarchies in UP.

left at the doorstep of the SC community center, where they held meetings. Denigrating the meeting place in their view was meant to silence and intimidate the SC community.

According to MSUP fieldworkers, upper caste backlash was evidence of the growing assertiveness of SC women. In serious cases, involving threats of physical violence against fieldworkers and *sangha* women, senior MSUP officials became directly involved. They used MSUP's administrative standing to report incidents to law enforcement agencies and issued official notices to village council (*panchayat*) members, warning them of the consequences of violating the SC-ST Atrocities Act, a law criminalizing caste discrimination and hate crimes. To avoid escalation of village conflicts, some SC women felt compelled to drop out of *sanghas*. On the other hand, the public nature of caste conflict signaled MSUP's commitment to combating discrimination, as *sangha* women reported in 8 out of 9 focus group discussions. Moreover, the vast majority of fieldworkers observed that village conflicts helped them to identify SC women who were bold and capable of leading *sangha* activities.

The KGBV School Program

MSUP's village-based programming for women supported the implementation of girls' education in KGBV schools. The four KGBV schools run by MSUP that I visited were well-functioning learning environments. The students appeared healthy and engaged in learning and extra-curricular activities.¹⁶ Health and nutrition was a central component of the KGBV program. Upon arrival in school, girls were often malnourished and had difficulty participating in classes. A health profile was created for each student and monitored regularly. During a class session, teachers asked students to share their life goals and career aspirations. An SC girl stated

¹⁶ As a participant-observer, I engaged with the KGBV students and held activity sessions on self-defense and Hindustani classical music.

confidently, “*I want to be prime minister of India.*”¹⁷ She went on to say that if a woman from her caste could lead India’s largest state (referencing Mayawati, the former chief minister of UP) then why could she not lead the country? The self-expression of the KGBV students differed substantially from the learning environment within government primary schools, which often emphasize rote learning from textbooks and completion of the standard curriculum for examinations (Aiyar, Dongre, & Davis, 2015). MSUP-run schools encouraged student participation and the development of self-confidence. They monitored each student’s progress and would share it with parents at quarterly intervals. Parents expressed a high degree of satisfaction with the KGBV schools, notwithstanding their apprehensions around residential schooling.

Under its women’s empowerment agenda, MSUP adopted a “*gender sensitive*” teaching model in KGBV schools.¹⁸ As per MSUP’s internal policy, teachers were selected through a competitive application process that prioritized two dimensions: (1) “aptitude,” which covered academic qualifications, professional experience and achievements; and (2) a “gender” component based on interviews and written responses to assess candidates on their understanding of patriarchy and capacity to work with disadvantaged women. After selection, KGBV teachers underwent rigorous training program informally known as “*de-learning*.” The notion of de-learning was based on socio-psychological theories of gender discrimination and aimed to discard teaching methods and perceptions of girls that reinforced gendered stereotypes.¹⁹ Whereas conventional approaches to teaching in government schools emphasized rote memorization from textbooks and the completion of the grade-wise curriculum for exams,

¹⁷ Interview with girls, KGBV school visit, Sitapur, July 2009.

¹⁸ Author interview with MSUP senior officials, Lucknow, March 2009.

¹⁹ Interviews with MSUP officials, Lucknow, February 2009.

MSUP's teacher training promoted the use of participatory methods and attention to gendered power dynamics in the classroom.²⁰ Teachers learned to discuss competing viewpoints with students and helped them interrogate how women were depicted in textbooks. In interviews, KGBV teachers noted that the training they received under MSUP departed significantly from their previous teaching experiences and went beyond the regular curriculum. As one teacher put it, teaching in the KGBV required "*listening, instilling confidence in students, and helping them find their own 'awaaz' [voice].*" The objective, she explained, was to "*transform the girls, within the classroom and out in the village.*"²¹

MSUP's innovative programming in KGBV schools also relied on trust between fieldworkers and disadvantaged households. The process of identifying adolescent girls who had dropped out of school and persuading their parents to re-enroll them was daunting. Conflicts frequently erupted within households and between village groups. Interviews with parents revealed unpleasant experiences with the schooling system, which compelled girls to drop out of school. SC girls in particular risked harassed by upper caste boys on the walk to and from school. Stories of sexual assault and other forms of gender-based violence circulated in villages. Insults from upper caste students and teachers were frequently cited in interviews with parents. Some reported that teachers would scold their children using abusive language, referring to them as "*good for nothing*" (*nikamma*), unfit to be educated.²² In three of the study districts, I observed government teachers asking SC students to mop floors, sweep the verandah and make tea. These indignities left parents skeptical about the KGBV program. Educating adolescent girls away

²⁰ Interviews with government school teachers, multiple districts, January – March 2009. On Mahila Samakhya's approach to teaching, see Saxena and Mehrotra (2014).

²¹ Interview with teacher at KGBV, Sitapur, March 2009.

²² Interviews with parents in multiple study villages, Mathura, Sitapur and Saharanpur.

from home created fears of mistreatment, even sexual abuse.²³ MSUP fieldworkers and *sangha* women worked together to allay parents' concerns, citing examples of educated girls from the same caste communities. In a village in Mathura, for instance, I observed a fieldworker who was SC met with parents to build their confidence in the KGBV, sharing her personal misgivings about sending her own daughter away from home to the same school.²⁴

Through deliberation with target communities, MSUP identified ways to adjust program rules to make the KGBV schools more attractive to parents. In Sitapur district, MSUP fieldworkers joined hands with *sangha* members to learn why parental participation at the KGBV was low during school meetings and family visitation days, held on Sundays. They learned that households normally travelled to the town center on Mondays, when the local market was open. The KGBV experimented by shifting the weekly school holiday from Sunday to Monday, allowing parents to complete market errands and meet their daughters in school the same day. The small change in rules lessened the burden of participation, saving parents the time and cost of an additional journey into town. Subsequently, teachers observed an increase in parental engagement at the school and in parent-teacher meetings. In the school principal's words: "*We have brought the community to the KGBV.*"²⁵ In focus group discussions, parents expressed appreciation for the sacrifice made by KGBV staff, who gave up their Sundays to facilitate the change.²⁶ In return, households contributed to school functions and religious festivals, helping to enrich their children's experience in school.

²³ Author interviews and focus group discussions with parents in villages where the KGBV school programs are active (January – March 2009)

²⁴ Participant observation with MSUP fieldworker, Mathura, February 2009.

²⁵ Interview with School Principal, KGBV, Sitapur, March 2009.

²⁶ Focus group discussion with parents at KGBV, Sitapur, March 2009.

In Saharanpur district, MSUP sought to work with families from the *Deobandi* community, a conservative Muslim sect. Parents would remove their daughters from school after sixth grade because formal schooling was thought to interfere with religious teachings.²⁷ MSUP fieldworkers from the same religious community described the difficulties of persuading family members, especially men, to enroll their daughters in the KGBV. As one remarked: “*Sensitizing men to the issues [of girls’ education] and listening to their concerns was necessary to gain the household’s trust.*”²⁸ Fieldworkers tried reassuring them that the KGBV supported all faiths and had facilities for Muslim students to perform daily prayers (*namaaz*). They stressed the school’s offering of Urdu language classes, which many parents found attractive. MSUP district staff also sought help from religious leaders to persuade families to enroll girls into school. These efforts had mixed results, producing less robust enrollment by Muslim girls in KGBV schools. Fieldworkers noted in interviews that their work with the *Deobandi* community was precarious, and if they pushed too far, they risked losing trust within the community. MSUP’s standing within target communities thus remained a constant source of tension for fieldworkers.

In some cases, MSUP fieldworkers took a stronger stand, using administrative-legal mechanisms to counter resistance to girls’ education. Depending on local marriage customs, adolescent girls were removed from school early. Some communities in Mathura, for example, practiced “*double marriage*,” which involved marrying a pair of sisters at once. Double marriage allowed families to spend less on dowry and wedding costs. The younger of the two sisters, sometimes too young to even realize that she was married, would be forced to quit school. To counter the (illegal) practice, MSUP district staff mobilized *sangha* members to raise awareness and held village gatherings to highlight the injustices of double marriage. I attended one such

²⁷ This sentiment was expressed in interviews with parents in *Deobandi* Muslim households in Saharanpur.

²⁸ Interview with MSUP fieldworker, Saharanpur, February 2009.

gathering in Mathura's Chata Block, where fieldworkers stressed the benefits of delaying marriage. They also pointed out the legal ramifications of child marriage, citing cases of police action in nearby villages. The gathering turned into a shouting match, with some residents challenging MSUP fieldworkers for interfering in family affairs. The argument brought out an egregious case of a twelve year-old girl who was removed from school after being promised by her relatives to a middle-aged man from another village. MSUP fieldworkers visited the girl's house. After failing to persuade her parents to cancel the marriage, they lodged a police complaint and threatened to pursue criminal charges against the family. A recognized agency, MSUP relied on its official standing to report child marriage and other violations to law enforcement. Taking legal action was risky, however, and could also backfire. In focus group discussions, fieldworkers reported that they avoided legal action where possible, since it could sow distrust and weaken their ties with communities.

The above examples illustrate how institutional activism by MSUP advanced girls' education. Before proceeding, I consider alternative explanations centered on (1) agency resources and (2) autonomy from political interference. Frontline agencies in India face major capacity constraints, which undermine policy implementation (Aiyar & Bhattacharya, 2016; Mangla, 2015). The paucity of local administrative resources can result in "bureaucratic overload," making it more difficult for street-level bureaucrats to perform complex tasks (Dasgupta & Kapur, 2020). Against this backdrop, KGBV schools likely benefitted from MSUP's administrative support. Yet, UP's education bureaucracy also had an infusion of resources under Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA), India's Education for All scheme, with dedicated funding and personnel for girls' education, including district-level Gender Coordinators and Resource Persons. Without denying the importance for resources, questions remain as to how

resources are utilized by local agencies. Resources at MSUP were aimed at a broad portfolio of programming that included women's health, law and security, and village governance. KGBV schools were encouraged to identify the multitude of barriers to girls' education (e.g. health and nutrition deficits) and adapt programs based on the local context.

As with resources, institutional autonomy from political interference is a critical ingredient for state performance (P. B. Evans, 1995; Geddes, 1994; McDonnell, 2017). School teacher politics in India, geared towards postings, salary and other employment conditions, is found to create barriers to education reform (Béteille, 2015; G. G. Kingdon & Muzammil, 2003). In UP, the politicization of government teachers and their union bodies is associated with weaker accountability of schools (G. Kingdon & Muzammil, 2012). Against this backdrop, MSUP's autonomy to formulate goals and internal processes was a likely boon, especially for the hiring and training of fieldworkers and KGBV teachers. Yet, autonomy can only partially explain why and how MSUP's frontline staff overcame impediments to girls' education. The activist orientation engendered within MSUP was critical as well, as it helped build and sustain frontline worker commitment in the most adverse conditions. It should be noted, moreover, that MSUP was not free from political interferences and conflict with the state bureaucracy. As I demonstrate below, the *maintenance* of autonomy also relied on the active work of MSUP staff.

Conflict inside the State

While operating under the aegis of UP's Department of Education, MSUP forged a distinct organizational identity based around its activism. Although some officials offered "*personal assistance*" for MSUP programming, fieldworkers in all three study districts saw administrative support as irregular and highly contingent on the individuals occupying positions

of authority.²⁹ Department of Education officials referred to MSUP as a government program, but MSUP staff lacked the civil service protections and salaries associated with government employment. Fieldworkers in particular identified more with the marginalized communities they worked in and were comfortable standing beside *sangha* women when they made collective demands on the local state. For example, in Sitapur district, *sangha* women identified problems in government primary schools—teacher absence and gaps in the provision of school lunches—across multiple villages. MSUP fieldworkers joined them to protest outside the district education office. Challenging bureaucratic rules formed part of MSUP's organizational repertoire, as fieldworkers narrated in a focus group discussion:

Respondent 1: District administration is wedded to their rules (*sarkari niyam*). However many times we may try to clarify our requests [for support], it doesn't matter. They will keep finding rules to tie our hands.

Respondent 2: And neither are we willing to bow down to state officials!

The gulf between MSUP's activist stance and the legalistic orientation of state officials spawned frequent disagreements. MSUP's senior officials defended their local staff, making formal representations to various line departments and coordinate with district administration. A senior MSUP official explained:

Resistance to the way we work is very stiff. From here [MSUP's state office] we network with Government of UP agencies and try to orient the bureaucracy about our work...At times, we get support from District Magistrates...but maintaining their support is never easy.³⁰

Likewise, other senior MSUP officials narrated the difficulties of operating as a semi-autonomous agency, citing the tensions of having state authority but also challenging that

²⁹ Interviews with MSUP fieldworkers, Saharanpur, February 2009.

³⁰ Interview with MSUP state official, Lucknow, March 2009.

selfsame authority.³¹ For example, by altering KGBV program rules, MSUP invited conflict with the Department of Education. Departmental training for school teachers followed the state-mandated curriculum, delivered at discrete intervals. Meanwhile, MSUP officials viewed teacher training as an “*ongoing process*” that happened continuously with input from gender program experts.³² A Department of Education official expressed misgivings with MSUP’s activist stance:

You can’t segregate yourself from the mainstream system. The [government’s education] schemes provide you with a framework to elaborate on and experiment. But the point is that you need to implement things as per the scheme. Don’t deviate from the scheme.³³

To “*deviate*,” the official explained, involved flouting the Department’s rules for teacher training, KGBV school timings, examinations, and the like. Meanwhile, MSUP officials saw deviation in a different light. Amid the patriarchy and caste-based exclusion of rural UP, bureaucratic rules were believed to reinforce the marginalization of disadvantaged women and girls. Like *sangha* women, who pressed against village hierarchies, MSUP district staff and fieldworkers referred to themselves as “*pressure groups*” inside the state, challenging constrictive rules and structures.³⁴ Conflict with local officials was source of pride for them and reinforced their identity as institutional activists. Senior MSUP officials set an example through their own activism, which took the form of advocacy work for gender-oriented policies. For example, they pressed UP’s state government to alter KGBV rules to allow the schools to continue up to twelfth grade. After completing eighth grade, KGBV graduates would return to their villages, where they risked failing to start or complete high school. MSUP fieldworkers

³¹ Sharma (2006, 2008) critically examines the tensions and contradictions of MSUP’s status as a semi-autonomous agency of the state. See also Ramachandran (2014), an education expert who narrates her experience of “*walking a tightrope*” between Mahila Samakhya and the state bureaucracy.

³² Interview with senior official, MSUP State Project Office, Lucknow, January 2009.

³³ Interview with senior official, Department of Education, Lucknow, December 2010.

³⁴ Interviews with multiple MSUP fieldworkers.

helped enroll KGBV graduates in government high schools, but they reported mixed results. The schools were a long distance away and disadvantaged girls easily fell through the cracks. For more than a decade, senior MSUP officials pressed for change with UP's political leadership and the Department of Education. In 2019, UP extended the KGBV program up to grade twelve.³⁵ MSUP's institutional activism thus went beyond reform implementation to influence the making of social policy as well.

5. CONCLUSION

For countries across the world, implementing social reforms remains a daunting challenges, all the more so when bureaucratic capacity is limited and social inequalities are entrenched. This paper has shown that progress can be made through the institutional activism of street-level bureaucrats. Through their activist efforts, fieldworkers, school teachers and officials at MSUP established programmatic ties within marginalized communities and integrated disadvantaged girls into the education system. The education reform program recorded setbacks as well, such as backlash from upper castes, which made it more difficult to maintain women's participation in some communities. Nevertheless, reform initiatives produced concrete gains for girls, across diverse pockets of rural UP. Although one cannot generalize from a single case, institutional activism may hold promise in other settings and policy areas. For example, MSUP's work on girls' education built upon its prior work on women's health and nutrition, suggesting possible synergy across these domains. Comparative analysis of institutional activism in different policy contexts is a productive avenue for future research.

³⁵ "54 KGBVs in UP to offer free hostels to girls up to class 12," *Indian Express*, 22 November 2019. [URL: <https://www.hindustantimes.com/education/54-kgbvs-in-up-to-offer-free-hostels-to-girls-of-up-to-class-12/story-iFF5MVe7wL0yGmdPjVCaSL.html>].

This paper contributes to research on street-level bureaucracy, but also departs from it in some ways, especially in its depiction of conflict as a burden (Piore, 2011). When reforms challenge existing norms and hierarchies, conflict makes implementation more challenging. However, negotiating conflict is an unavoidable part of the institutional work that street-level bureaucracies perform (Lawrence, Suddaby, & Leca, 2009). How street-level bureaucrats get oriented towards social conflict may thus have a profound impact on how marginalized citizens experience the local state (Brodin, 1997). Conflict may even play a constructive part in making social injustices public and facilitating solidaristic ties marginalized groups. In that vein, this paper has underscored the importance of organizational processes that help sustain institutional activism on the front lines of reform. These processes included the selection and training of staff, as well as deliberative organizational spaces for street-level bureaucrats to interrogate status-quo social arrangements. More research is needed to unpack the organizational mechanisms that enable street-level bureaucrats to support marginalized citizens and mediate conflicts. A promising line of work suggests that deliberative forums allow marginalized citizens to express and resolve disagreements in different spheres of public policy (Barron, Diprose, & Woolcock, 2011; Gibson & Woolcock, 2008; Sanyal & Rao, 2018). How and to what extent such practices can become institutionalized within street-level bureaucracies remains an open question.

Finally, this paper adds to the growing research on institutional “pockets of effectiveness,” relatively high-performing bureaucracies in developing countries (Barma, Huybens, & Viñuela, 2014; Leonard, 2010; McDonnell, 2020; Roll, 2014). The autonomy of these agencies is seen as a critical ingredient to their success (P. B. Evans, 1995). Likewise, I have shown that a degree of autonomy from the education bureaucracy allowed MSUP room to formulate goals and processes to fulfill its women’s empowerment agenda. Autonomy was not,

however, a fixed condition set by law or institutional design. Rather, autonomy had to be claimed and re-claimed, over multiple bouts of conflict between MSUP and the education bureaucracy.

Future research may explore when and how effective institutions in developing countries *maintain* autonomy over time and negotiate conflicts inside the state.

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