STRATEGY OF WOMEN EMPOWERMENT: THE KURNOOL EXPERIENCE

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INTRODUCTION

The growing social awareness across the globe has brought a number of issues to the fore among which gender equality and empowerment of women are very significant. Discrimination against women in the form of male-female differentiation constitutes the core of the gender-biased system. The education is the biggest liberating force and the rise in the levels of education which nourishes progressive outlook and the advent of industrialization and modernization have effected a sea change in the attitudes and thinking pattern of the people. The empowerment is not essentially political alone in fact; political empowerment will not succeed in the absence of economic empowerment. The scheme of micro financing through Self Help Groups (SHGs) has transferred the real economic power in the hands of women and has considerably reduced their dependence on men. This has helped in empowerment of women and building self-confidence, but lack of education often comes in the way and many a times they had to seek help from their husbands for day-to-day work viz; bank, accounts, etc. The distance education provides an opportunity to these women to improve their skills. The higher level of learning will help them to learn skill and vocations and play an effective role in the management of SHGs.

The term empowerment has been bandied about so much in recent years that there is now a genuine danger of it being coopted as a 'development buzzword' that will meet the same fate as terms such as 'decentralisation', 'people's participation' and the like. Despite this, it is important to understand what the term connotes. After attempting a review of literature, Shetty (1992) comes to the conclusion that empowerment is easy to 'intuit' but complex to define. But while it may be difficult to define it, one is able to understand its meaning when one sees the manifestation of what it implies. Thus an empowered individual would be one who experiences a sense of self-confidence and self-worth; a person who critically analyzes his/her social and political environment; a person who is able to exercise control over decisions that affect his/her life.

In view of low literacy rate of women and the gigantic task of educating rural women a suitable strategy will have to be planned. The major task is to identify the areas where these
groups in fact, are facing problems because at this stage only the problem solving adult learning technique will attract these rural poor to improve their working and income. The success of any strategy of women empowerment depends upon the following factors:

1. Level of education, hard work
2. Social custom and Literacy
3. Family planning, small family
4. Environment, tree growing, kitchen gardening.

Various case studies show that there is a positive correlation between credit availability and empowerment of women.

On the face of it, Distance Education appears per se a ‘women friendly’ form of acquiring education and formal qualifications. There are two characteristics which are generally seen to render this mode of learning specially suitable for women, by making distance education compatible with other spheres of life, first, there is no attendance requirement, second, at the same time, there is a high degree of flexibility in learning schedules and time management. These characteristics have three distinct and undisputed advantages for the distant student. Since, the distance-teaching curriculum is designed for independent study if can well fit with family commitments and living at home. Learning material is sent to the women at their home or workplace they can learn while they earn and the NGO/SHG may provide them the required tuition wherever they desire.

Rural women can learn at their own pace on the basis of availability of time. Technology helps them round the clock access on student support services. In rural India where girls and women are largely excluded from education at all levels D.E. may be the only option. Opportunities are not equal. Responsibilities are more they have to overcome greater odds, less support from their families, early marriage childcare.

The members of SHGs are mainly illiterate and do not have access to formal education. In a study it was reported that the members of the Groups were not fully literate and were not able to read and write. Many are now able to append their signatures perhaps an outcome of the government-sponsored literacy programme and the compulsion to affix signature on several occasions as members of SHGs The handicap of literacy would be a hurdle for achieving many desired results. For example they will be unable to follow the accounts maintained by the group and hence remain ignorant about the amount pooled individually and in the group, and would be unable to draft an application to represent their
case. It is therefore essential to provide them education through especially designed modules through distance education that are directly useful as a member of SHG.

At this stage they do not need school or university certificate, Diploma or degrees. They need improvement in their professional skills and solving their day-to-day problems in the working and functioning of SHGs. They should be explained the advantage of group based strategies in poverty alleviation. Importance of savings and opening bank account, marketing of products, timely repayment and repeat loaning. It is important to explain that she is not alone and that such problems are being faced universally. Only by self-help they may fight against their misfortune and improve upon the fate of their family and children.

All these problems, opportunities and chances can be explained the women through short duration training module delivered at their doorstep or work place. At the initial stage we may face certain problems and resistance from the participants if we demand some extra time and money. It is therefore suggested that the benefits should be linked with the DE modules and subsidies should be in the form of distance education and not cash. There are instances where cash subsidies were taken away forcefully by male, members in the family for liquor consumption and gambling and made no significant impact in the society. But education is such a type of subsidy that cannot be robbed by male members in the family. Secondly educated mother will further educate her children and thus will help in mitigating the curse of illiteracy and poverty from the society.

**Meaning of Empowerment**

Empowerment is not essentially political alone; it is a process having personal, economic, social and political dimensions with personal empowerment being the core of the empowerment process. In fact political empowerment will not succeed in the absence of economic empowerment. The Scheme of Micro-financing through SHGs create empowerment promoting conditions for women to move from positions of marginalisation within household decision making process and exclusion within community, to one of greater centrality, inclusion of voice.

The Social processes of Micro financing programmes strengthens women’s self esteem and self worth, instill a greater sense of awareness of social and political issues leading to increased mobility and reduced traditional seclusion of women. Most importantly micro-finance programmes enable women to contribute to the household economy, increasing their intra-household bargaining power. Thus, micro financing through Self-help
groups has transferred the real economic power in the hands of women and has considerably reduced their dependence on men. But the lack of education often comes in the way and many a times they had to seek help from their husbands or any other educated man/woman for day-to-day work. The political as well as economic empowerment will not succeed in the absence of women education in skills and vocations they require the most. The Governments in developing countries therefore must take effective steps to enroll the members of SHGs in the Schemes of open schooling or any other distance mode to impart education. Although it is also true that economic empowerment alone does not always lead to reversal in gender relationship.

Education Empowers Women

It is also observed that open education at present is mainly catering to the needs of elites in the urban areas and it has to make in roads in rural areas where India lives. In rural areas women are totally dependent on men, as they do not have economic power to spend. The historical relationships with their husbands can be seen as influenced by historical factors that shape the social structures of how they are subordinated. It has been observed in several research studies that women do experience a double day, as they return to study combined with their domestic roles. The Policy planners must think to integrate the economic benefits with education. I suggest the Differential Rate of Interest (DIR) for women doing any Course through Open schools or any other mode of Open and Flexible learning.

Women Education is sometimes also perceived as a threat by their husbands. Studying is seen as changing the identity of the partner from being subservient and domesticated (Morgan 1995: 321)

It has been noted that education as such serves to empower women. This may be on the most basic level through literacy programmes or on more advance levels through university study and even Ph. D. programmes. A UNICEF study (1998) on Violence against women in South East Asia concluded that compulsory schooling for all girls would be a long-term measure to reduce violence against women by providing them qualifications as the basis for getting a job which in turn will enable them to earn a their own income and improve their status. Thus the SHGs should in-fact also be converted in to Self Help Study Groups that will give them not only enhanced income but also enhanced esteem and self confidence to do something meaningful for the society as a whole. They should realize that they are not the isolated unproductive but important wheel for the smooth running of the society. The
economic incentives and effective NGOs participation will definitely make the women empowerment a reality from a distant dream at present.

Women, Literacy and Empowerment – An Analysis of the Nellore Experience

From the Kutmnool experience, one can begin to develop a broad conceptual framework of what empowerment means.

Empowerment and Marginalized Groups

The term empowerment is focused on marginalized groups - the landless, the powerless, the voiceless. In Kurnool, it was the scheduled castes, and other backward caste women who took up the arrack issue and who as a result, have spearheaded an agitation that has now elicited support from middle class women and men. The anti-arrack agitation has become such a powerful women's movement and has taken such deep roots in the Andhra countryside that the yearly arrack sales have now been postponed indefinitely in Kurnool district and in some other parts of Andhra Pradesh.

Empowerment Deals with Strategic rather than Practical Gender Interests

It is important to differentiate between what Molyneux (1981) terms 'the practical gender interests' and 'the strategic gender interests'. She notes that the former are short term and linked to immediate needs arising from women's current responsibilities vis-a-vis the livelihood of their families and children, while the latter address bigger issues such as sexual division of labour within the home, the removal of institutionalized forms of gender discrimination, the establishment of political equality, freedom of choice over child-bearing, and the adoption of adequate measures against male violence and control over women. It appears from the Kurnool experience that to begin with, the agitation addressed the 'practical gender interests' in so far as its genesis was due to the rural women's concern about their husbands' callous indifference to their responsibilities towards the family and to the upbringing of their children. But as the agitation picked up momentum, it appeared that it had the potential to address the 'strategic gender interests', although the women from Kurnool have strategically decided to focus exclusively on the arrack issue for the present. This was made apparent from the discussions with village women in some villages during which it was categorically stated that they would first win the battle against arrack before taking up any other issue. But interestingly, power relationships between men and women within the family
and outside are slowly beginning to change. Women have formed anti-arrack vigilance squads in the village to ensure that illicit arrack is not smuggled into the village. There have been instances when the women have successfully challenged the bureaucracy, the police, and the politicians. But to what extent the anti-arrack agitation would be able to sustain itself, consolidate its gains and move on the other issues of concern to women is now uncertain due to the present policy of the state government, which has cracked down severely on those functionaries who support the agitation.

Sustainability is an Important Aspect of Empowerment

The direction of empowerment is that of self-reliance and withdrawal of external agents wherever the initial impetus has come from outside. Grassroots organisations, an integral part of most empowerment strategies, are thus seen as critical elements in ensuring sustainability. But the total literacy campaigns are fended by the Government. That being so, the questions to be asked are: "What is the extent of empowerment that would be acceptable? What is the 'space' that would be provided by a government-funded programme?" That the 'space' provided was not very much has now become evident from the fact that the Chief Minister of Andhra Pradesh has expressed his anger at the manner in which certain district collectors, while implementing the literacy programme, had raised 'anti-government' sentiment among the learners through the literacy primers. While ordering that such provocative lessons be expunged from the, literacy primers, the Chief Minister has also ordered that government functionaries should dissociate themselves from the agitation. That the state might even resort to repressive measures is becoming a distinct possibility because of the political nature of the agitation.

References