



Self-Help Groups and Women Empowerment

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Abstract:

In India, both men and women are not treated equally. Due to this, gender problem has arisen everywhere. This gender discrimination can be removed by empowering women, by providing them equality in rights, opportunities and responsibilities. Poverty and unemployment has become the biggest challenge for the world, especially for developed countries like India. In India, from Vedic Period, women play a vital role. So for the development of the country, women must be empowered financially and socially. Especially for the rural poor women, self help groups were established. Through SHGs they can find out employment by having knowledge, confidence and skills. These groups are made to provide credit to the poor women. Some NGOs are running such SHGs from which their members can have loans for various purposes.

SHGs have created a revolutionary change among the women folk. SHGs are considered as agents of social change which have motivated women to function. To improve women's knowledge and skills, these groups are organising various programmes like gender awareness, social education, training etc. so that they can take their own decisions. Due to SHGs women can develop their self-help attitude, leadership and participate more effectively. Through SHGs saving habits can be increased and rural banking system can be expanded. Mostly networking of SHGs and federations are spread everywhere. These federations are aware about women's problems and try to solve them out. Through women entrepreneurship their skills and expertise can be utilised in beneficial economic activities. Government has declared some women oriented schemes to eradicate poverty among them. So now-a-days, at somewhat, women has become economically empowered. For women, who are living below poverty line, some micro-finance institutions have been established to provide them credit. Women contribute both as manufacturers and labourers. Even at agricultural sector, women are in a better condition now. They are also doing some supportive services.

Keywords: micro finance, women empowerment, self-help groups, credit, saving

1. Introduction

India is considered as a land of various contrasts and paradoxes. Among which women empowerment may be seen as the glaring paradoxes. Among the world's population, 50% are women. Women are not treated equally to men in all the places due to their social status. In the Western countries, in most of the fields women are treated equally with men. In the past women suffered from many disabilities. Due to disabilities and inequalities between men and women gender problems have risen. In this context we think that women empowerment means to provide equal rights, opportunities and responsibilities to women, so that they can go a long way to remove the existing problem of gender discrimination.

Illiteracy, poverty and unemployment are the major problems for developing countries like India. Women play an essential role in the development of any nation. If women are developed, the nation will automatically become developed. So women should be respected at home as well as in the nation.

2. Concept of Self Help Groups

Self Help Group (SHG) is a village based financial intermediary committee which is composed of 10-12 local women or men. Here generally a mixed group is not preferred. A number of SHGs are located in India. In other countries also SHGs can be found, especially in South Asia and South East Asia. In many developing countries SHGs are found especially among the rural poor women. SHGs goals to inculcate the habits of savings even in small amounts, that is supplemented by borrowing from outside sources and this saved and borrowed fund is rotated by landing with the group. SHGs play an important role to uplift women financially. SHGs provide opportunities for women to gain knowledge, confidence and skills to

find better livelihood and financial support. Essentially, SHGs are the informal associations of the poor which seek to improve their living conditions through small amounts of credit availed from the bank. Among this groups members try to save any amount from their earnings and mutually agree to contribute to a common fund and then lend to the members for having their productive and emerging needs.

The origin of SHGs may be traced to the year 1975. The concept of SHGs was initiated in India by NABARD during 1986-87. The actual effect of their functioning could be seen from 1992 onwards after the linkage of SHGs with the commercial banks. Under the microfinance programme, SHG Promoting Institutions (SHPIs) plays a vital role in the whole process for the success of the programme. SHPIs like NGO's credit co-operatives, non-banking financial companies etc. aims to interact with the poor families especially women to make their small groups. The groups meet frequently and collect small savings from their members. To maintain their own accounts, simple accounting methods are taught to them. The group can get external fund in multiples of its own savings when the pooled thrifts grow. SHPIs, banks or donors give funds to help their members as loans for productive activities. For giving credit to any member decisions are taken by the groups under particular terms. Members can take loans for different purposes. Before providing any credit to any member can generate adequate income for repayment of credit. The major strengths of the SHG movements are self-confidence, decision making group dynamics, and creating saving habits among the members.

3. Position of Women in India

In India, the position of women has passed through ups and downs. Like in Vedic age, they were given respect and worshipped as goddess. During the Muslim age their status declined. Their position has become the worst while in the British periods they took a leap forward. They participated in many freedom movements and played a noble role. The post-independence period raised the expectations for Indian women for greater liberty and freedom. In the Indian constitution it has been stated that there should not be discrimination of any person based on sex, caste, creed and religion but then even the Indian women do not have the respected and equal place as men have.

Now a days Indian women have made progress in many fields like education, health, technology, Economics, politics etc. Women are playing a multiple role. They are doing household works as well as job works outside. So she doesn't has any free time to enjoy the fruits of her economic independence. In many cases she becomes a custodian of her salary as her salary becomes a part of the total income of her family. So only the economic independence is not the solution of her progress but the social system must change, if necessary, for her independence.

In 19th century the social reforms were carried out to improve the status of women. The laws and amendments also have been done to make their position better. The laws like infanticide, child marriage, widow remarriage etc. have been enacted. But such laws could not achieve the desired results. At present the Government has taken a number of steps to save the girl child.

For equality, the women still have to travel a long. For women, belonging to weaker sections of the society, employment and income generating production programmes were started in 1982-83 to train them and provide them employment on sustained basis. SHGs facilitate a silent sustainable grass-root. SHG is a revolution for improving the lives of the rural poor women.

4. The Concept of SHGs Evolved out of Women's Organization

In villages, earlier NGOs organized the women Sangams. Depending upon the population of the women of the villages, the total number of members might be exceed even 100. In the executive committee there were minimum 7 members. Generally, the president of the Sangam was considered as a dominant personality and all other members were not having much role to play. Monthly subscription was given to the major participation of women sangams were not always registered. For some financial help, they were

dependent on the state social welfare board, panchayats unions, banks etc. It often happens that women sangams were organized and registered just to have the advantage of the grant-in-aid programmes from welfare boards and after getting it the sangams get disorganized, disrupted and vanished. Means the women sangams were looking for somebody's help from outside. As the president took decisions, if there was any appreciation or accusation, she became responsible for it.

NGOs living with the rural communities, closely observed and examined such women's activities. So that they could have alternative examples to substitute the traditional women sangams to evoke active participation among the members of the groups. To initiate development programmes in well manner, the NGOs identified the women groups as discerning and potential force among the villagers. NGOs came to know that the small groups worked effectively. So such small groups of similar interests were organized for their effectiveness. And thus, the self-help groups were born.

The concept of SHGs was blossomed in India and also in other countries like Bangladesh, and other parts of the world form inherited principles of management from the U.S.A. and European countries. Many experts form NGOs visited various regions of the world to spread awareness for the SHGs concept. Many countries which organized SHGs and promoted indigenous banking were invited to take part in the conference on micro-credit held in Washington.

Among women folk, women's movement and a silent revolution is taking place through SHGs. According to the NGOs' capacity and ability, in a particular region they organize SHGs from 50 to 500 groups. Many NGOs have organized SHGs district wide and state wide. SHGs work as agents of social change. So they are motivated to function. To improve their knowledge, skill and raise their decision making power, these groups are imparted with gender awareness, social education and training. To ensure effective participation, each group is restricted to 20 members.

5. Objectives

1. To develop self-help attitude among women folk.
2. To spread awareness among women about collective leadership.
3. To use ability and skills of women in women oriented programmes.
4. To promote women for saving.
5. To spread awareness among women for banking habits.
6. To develop rural banking system.
7. To establish SHGs at all level for credit purpose.
8. To solve women related problems.
9. To promote women for entrepreneurship.

6. Networking of SHGs

Network of SHGs has been spread at cluster level, mandal level, block level and district level. By this network women become empowered at somewhat. Due to this networking women get a platform to deal with their problems like gender discrimination, dowry, low wages, domestic violence etc. The federation represents these issues in front of the district and state level officers to be solved and fulfilled.

7. Women's Bank/Mahila Bank

NGOs have made easy the SHGs to join together and pool all their resources as a common fund. With the help of this capital, the women groups run their indigenous banks in a central place of all those villages. These women manage the banks without any involvement of any man. Their banks work in the same manners as other modern banks work. They also maintain records as other banks. But they have limited numbers of members. Their banks remain more busier during weekly market days. Here women members withdraw/deposit money on account of their transactions. In India, there are many women banks having resources more than Rs. 50 lacs. NGOs are constantly and consistently motivating these women groups

to run and own their banks. For the members, credit is available timely. Status of total recovery has been ensured to enable smooth functioning of the banks. For major activity, micro credit is being undertaken.

8. Income Generating Programmes

To utilize the ability and capacity of women, they should be self-employed. By this, women have to play dual role. In case of self-employment activities, she can adjust easily her household schedule and business work. To utilize women's skills and abilities in beneficial economic activities, women entrepreneurship has been developed. After implementation of new economic policies in 1991, education opportunities have been increased, scope of public sector is reduced, so need for entrepreneurs is increased. The women get chance and have started participating in economic activities. But participation of women is still less as per statistical data available from various reports.

9. Economic Empowerment of Women

1. Eradication of Poverty

In the world, women constitute the majority part of the population and among these women, the majority part of them is living below poverty line and some of them are extremely poor. To eradicate poverty, many programmes have been implemented. Some of these programmes are specially oriented for such women to motivate them and make them come forward by offering them economic and social opportunities to enhance their abilities.

2. Micro-credit

To uplift the women living below poverty line, micro-finance institutions has been established. With the existence of these institutions, these women can easily get micro-credit for consumption and production.

3. Women and Economy

Women play an important role in designing and implementing any kind of policies i.e. macro-economic, social etc. by their participation. They play many roles like producers and workers in formal and informal sectors. For them, working conditions and employment policies should be drawn up. Whenever necessary, these measures should be changed to improve the position of women workers and producers.

4. Women and Agriculture

In agricultural and allied sectors, women are having a critical position. To make them in better position, concentrated efforts will be made, which ensure advantages of training. According to their numbers, various plans and programmes, they will be able to get them. In the agriculture sector, women workers will be able to have expanded benefits like training women in soil conservation, forestry, dairy, horticulture, animal husbandry, poultry, fisheries etc.

5. Supported Services

Women are facing many problems when they become working women, as they are much more responsible for their families. To support them some provisions are made eg. Child care facilities, including crèches at working places as well as at educational institutions, homes for aged and disabled women etc. All such services will ensure their co-operation in social, economic and political life. Self-Help Groups boost women to be empowered. So they become boon for women empowerment. Through SHGs, not only an individual woman, but also the family and community can be empowered. SHGs empowered women socially, politically and economically.

10. Suggestions

To develop SHGs members, some suggestions are as below:

- NGOs must promote saving habits.
- Communication between NGOs and SHG members must be effective.
- NGOs should be careful about social and economic environment of the SHGs.
- NGOs should be aware with the life style, available resources, skills, market, working environment, saving habits of the members, their relations with others, etc.

- SHG member should share and discuss his problems with the member of other SHG.

11. Conclusion

Especially in rural areas, the government is trying to make awareness among the rural women for SHGs, and make them join SHGs. This effort is taken by the government to improve their status, especially for women, who are living below poverty level. Through SHGs women can be able to take their own decision required for their own development. Some NGOs are also working for them, but they are not enough able to facilitate periodical meetings, training programmes etc. Many women have formed their groups is a positive sign for their upliftment.

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