



Women's Engagement in Third Sector: Some Reflections from the Field

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ABSTRACT

Women in development is a most debated topic in the current times. The role of women in the process of development is widely accepted as a mean to achieve more comprehensive social and economic development. The involvement of women in the 'development sector' and voluntary sector is imperative for achieving social development. Women's participation brings their psychosocial empowerment as well the development of people they work for. Although the proportion of women working in the development sector is minimal, their contribution in the sector is highly valued. The present paper is based on the field experiences of the authors in working with a grassroots organization where a large number of women are engaged as community organizers. The community organizers engage with the vulnerable population in the locality. The paper aims to highlight the psychosocial and economic empowerment of women involved as community organizers in a grassroots organization. The empowerment of women working in the development sector is a multifaceted phenomenon in which their empowerment would impact the development of the people around them through a structured intervention. The community level engagement of community organizers were closely observed along with in-depth interaction with them. The perspective of organization and beneficiaries also noted down. The field experiences indicate significant psycho-social and economic empowerment of women community organizers through their engagement as community organizers. Further, their engagement as community organizers is empowering the vulnerable segments of the population. The observation results imply the significance of women involvement in the third sector.

Keywords: Women, Development sector, Third sector, Empowerment, Community Organizer, India.

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INTRODUCTION



The engagement of women in all arena of social life is integral and imperative for positive social changes and development. Although the women's role in development is widely accepted in almost all policy frameworks, there are a plethora of hindrances remain in the road of women empowerment [3]. The very societal attitude and limited access to resources delimit women's participation in the process of development [4]. The most crucial issue that limits the scope of women empowerment is the participation in the workforce [7]. This is very true in the case of many developing countries including India where the work participation is declining and gender differences persist [14]. There is a significant difference of gender also persists in the voluntary sector. Although women also equally participate in the third sector, the high profile jobs in the voluntary sector remains with men [13]. The engagement of women in the workforce and income generating activities not only make them independent but it also probably enhances their decision making power and empowerment [1]. A certain segment of the women workforce have reciprocal roles in which their employment role not only empower them, but it brings broader changes in the life of people they for [8]. This is very true in the case of women working in the development sector. Their engagement in the grassroots level intervention provides enough scope for their development as well as the development of the community [24]. Unlike other employment, development sector facilitates its employees to equip with various psychosocial skills [23]. The very nature of the working environment and social issues they deal with making them potential social activists. The role of women in the third and voluntary sector is widely accepted [15, 16].

The role of the third sector in social transformation and development is integral to inclusive development. The voluntary sector functions as complementary to the state and government level interventions. Being a vulnerable segment of the population, women

had enough attention in the interventions of the third sector [11]. But engagement of women in the third sector or voluntary sector's workforce is not very promising in the context of India. Facilitating women in the workforce of development sector can bring positive change for themselves as well the beneficiaries [12]. The present paper explores the contribution of women in the third sector.

The Field Experiences

The present paper depicts the experiential learning of the authors while working with a grassroots voluntary organization which largely employed women for their interventions. The organization is on operation since last 40 years. Their operational area covers 9 regions incorporating 82 villages. They promote the Community Bases Organizations (CBOs) at the villages, Self Help Groups (SHGs) and have direct interventions with the families on different domains of development. The village level interventions are carried out by the women community organizers. Each of the village has two community organizers. The basic responsibilities adhered to them includes but not limited to formation of self-help groups (SHGs), strengthening families, to identify and address problems of the community, promotion of a value based society, financial inclusion, engage in income generation programs, women specific issues, gender and development and promotion of agriculture. Apart from these, necessary legal and medical aids were provided to the needy. The intervention has a core focus on the women related issues and the major beneficiaries of the program were women.

1. Socio-demographic Characteristics of the Community Organizers and Beneficiaries

All the community organizers involved were hails from the nearby localities of the organization or the operational areas. Women of different age group are works as community organizers. Women from 30-55 years of age found employed as community organizers. It was observed that



more than half of the community organizers were Christians followed by Hindus. Muslims constitutes around 5 percent. All the community organizers are possess a vast experience. Majority of them have an experience between 6-10 years. Most of the women live in nuclear family set ups. A large majority of the respondents have secondary level of education while few reported having primary and graduation. Majority of the women community organizers were married while few were widows and single. Majority of the community organizers have previously done some or the other jobs and switched to the role of community organizer while for a few it was their new job.

The operational areas of the organization consist of tribal and non-tribal localities. The core focus of the intervention is on socio-economic development of the tribal and rural population through a holistic approach. The operational areas are predominantly selected on the basis of the backwardness of the localities. The proportion of the people living under below poverty line is quite high in the villages. The state of socio-economic deprivation is persistent in the villages. The prevalence of social problems including alcoholism and domestic violence also reported high. The shift from agrarian and farm based society also had a significant effect on these communities as the livelihood opportunities were reduced. The community based intervention of the organization has focused on all these aspects.

2. Psychosocial Empowerment

The engagement as a community organizer has made wider changes in the life of women. Many women seen their employment not merely as an option for earning rather they inspired to transform the society as well. The long term engagement as a community organizer made many women to be sensitive on the social issues they address. Most of the women were privileged of their designation and the dignity they have from the beneficiaries/community when they make efforts for uplifting their life [5, 23]. The

role of community organizer brought them more respect and increased their morale. Major proportion of the community organizers cited that their husbands/family is supporting in their job involvement. The job role has changed their position in the family. The women community organizers in indicates that they take collective decision at their home within the family.

The community organizers have solved different types of problems of people in the community helping them in getting loans for entrepreneurship, protest for closing alcohol shop in the community as crime rate was increasing, sanitation problems, health problems etc., [6, 9]. There was a 100% improvement in the communication skills of community organizers after they joined the job. Before they were hesitant but after joining the job they have become bold in addressing public. The way of looking at the social problems have changed after joining their job as community organizers. All the community organizers gave positive response in change of their social sensitiveness. The ability to respond to the matters related to society has changed, now they have a quest for social change. There is a 100% improvement in social status of community organizers after they joined the job. They are quite confident in doing this job and they believe that it can be done better by females as there are more problems related to female in the community which can be easily understood and solved by female community organizers. The future goals of all the community organizers are social in nature as they want to make their units better and continue social work and keep helping others.

One community organized stated that *"Certainly the job made our financial status well, the same I had earlier too but the amount of respect I have now is incomparable to anything"* Another women community organizer stated that *"There are varieties of jobs including the one I have done earlier but the scope of learning is vast in the*



present job. I have learned many things which is useful for me, my children and family”.

Another women community organizer stated that *“I was very dependent, the priest recommended me for the job. I haven't had any interest. Due to the financial circumstances, I had to join. Now I think it would have been a mistake if I hadn't joins here. The job made me independent. Now I can stand for me as well as for others. I have learned a lot throughout the years”*

The narrative of women indicates the psychosocial empowerment they had due to their engagement in the employment. When asked on the pre-employment and current perspective on their empowerment status, most of them said that employment and long term involvement in the community made them enough capable of dealing with the stresses of their own life as well as able to support the needy.

3. Economic Independence

The community organizers have an income between five thousands to ten thousands based on the experience. Except a few, most of the community organizers have saving. The interaction with community organizers indicated that most of them were engaged into unorganized sector or doing household businesses before taking up the role of as community organizer. The chances for potential saving were less in most of the women's case. The engagement in the financial inclusion process for others has beneficial for them as well. A majority of them reportedly had loan from different sources and made it utilized for properly for asset creation. Their income allows them to repay the loans properly.

The standards of living of majority of the community organizers are raised after joining job although some of them have reported the inadequate emoluments they receive [10]. Since the job is first for majority of the community organizers they are economically empowered and

independent. They manage their money and decide themselves on how to spend it. Their husband and they together contribute financially for smooth functioning of family.

One of the community organizer stated that *“it is not merely a job for me... this job changed my life, I could support my family now as my children's education. The lessons learned from the job has made my life different one”*. The narratives of women underline that the employment in development sector is not merely an income generation activities. The learning from the employment has wider implications for their life.

4. Social Capital

The engagement with the community has potentially influenced the women to strengthen their social capital. The relationships and networks with the neighborhood and the community become more productive than before [22, 20]. The trust between community organizers and community has strengthened. The respect of community towards women's job role has further contributed to the reinforcement of mutual help. The mechanisms of mutual help between community members have strengthened due to the continuous intervention programs. There are more venues created for the women and community members to come together. Most of these venues are created due to the efforts of the NGOs intervention and the women community organizers are implementing those strategies. The groups, clubs and women forum has given the community members to understand each other in a more pragmatic manner. The relationship formed in the intervention groups are functioning as significant a significant mechanisms for mutual help.

The community organizers also reported that their social relationship has significant change. There is an increase in the friend circle of all the community organizers resulting in good social capital. The relationships are both professionally



and personally beneficial for the women community organizers [17, 18].

One of the women community organizer stated that *"I really feel that the job made my social networks very stronger. I have many people who would help me if I am in a need. My attitude is also changed. I also there for helping others"*. Another woman stated that *"the community is the best way to engage yourself, enhance your relationship. The relationship pay you back in a positive manner"*. The community organizers and beneficiaries have developed their social networks through the engagement. This is a positive indication underlines the role of women in the wider process of social transformation.

5. Reciprocity of the Engagement

The community organization at the grassroots level has brought positive changes in the life of the organizers as well the beneficiaries. It is obvious to have positive results on a structured intervention. But the uniqueness of the community based intervention is the participation and contribution of women. The community organizers who hails from the deprivation and vulnerability have the opportunity to contribute to the life of people like them as well for own development. The increased sensitivity of the community organizers enabled them to take up social issues that are not even part of their job profile [19].

Community organizers have gained confidence in decision making and supporting for the cause of community. There are a number of incidents where community organizers mobilized the community against some of the social evils. Once a community organizer along with other ladies of the community protested to close down an alcohol shop and they were successful in their mission. The ability of community organizers and the community's trust on them is evident from such initiatives. The mutual support between community workers and the beneficiaries are strong. The most widely cited reason for the

engagement as community organizer was the reciprocity; the opportunity for own development and the prospects of contribution to the community development.

CONCLUSION

The women's engagement in third sector absolutely makes difference. The uniqueness of engagement is not just on the community organizer's personal well-being and empowerment but it contributed the community development [21]. The identity of being women allows them to experience and strategize appropriate interventions for the women and the community. Women get more empowered in the process of empowering others [26]. Community organizers have empowered socially, mentally and financially as a result of their engagement in the job role as well promote the social development in the community [27]. The role of women in social transformation in the changing social scenario is imperative. Third sector is essentially the most suitable field where women's contributions can be better utilized [28].

1989

COMPLIANCE WITH ETHICAL STANDARDS

A. Disclosure of potential conflicts of interest.

Author A declares that he/she has no conflict of interest. Author B declares that he/she has no conflict of interest. Author C declares that he/she has no conflict of interest. Author D declares that he/she has no conflict of interest.

B. Research involving human participants and/or animals.

All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki Declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

C. Informed consent

Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants involved in the study.

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