



Higher Education and Empowerment of Rural Women: Need for Linkage with Self Help Groups

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“Woman is the companion of man gifted with equal mental capacities. She has the right to participate in the activities of man and she has an equal right of freedom and liberty with him.” - Mahatma Gandhi

ABSTRACT

National development cannot happen without the development of women. Even though women constitute half of the population, there is much to be desired in so far as their empowerment is concerned. As stated by Amartya Sen (2000), State policies have no meaning unless they consider the weakest person of the society. It is contended in this article that rural women are the weakest persons of the society and their empowerment is an absolute necessity. Even though the institutions of higher education have traditionally restricted their function to scholarly pursuits, it is advocated that they have to expand their sphere of functions to contribute to community development and thereby to national development. The Self Help Groups formed by rural women have been the main source of empowerment to rural women. It is suggested that higher education institutions could collaborate with the SHGs in their neighborhood so that SHGs become more effective in achieving their agenda of empowerment of women.

Key Words: Empowerment of Rural Women, Self Help Group, Higher Education

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I. Introduction

India, with its 1.4 billion people with diverse socio-economic backgrounds and culture is the largest democracy and also fastest growing economy. The country has made good progress in terms of eradication of gender biases, poverty reduction, education and employment creation. But still majority of the marginalized groups in India do not have access to economic equity, access to basic amenities such as water, sanitation and shelter. Among the economically marginalized groups is the group of women who constitute more than 50% of the population and of whom only 71.5% are literate (NFHS-5, 2019-21). Going by the people oriented development model of Amartya Sen, women account for a greater contribution in the national development index as compared to men. Hence, for achieving greater human development, the capabilities of women to do things that they value are to be enhanced through greater freedoms. Women constitute only 29% of the workforce but forms majority of the destitute in the country. There has been a failure in transforming the available women base into human resource. This, in turn, has hampered not only the economic development of women but also of the country as a whole (Deka, 2019). In the words of the Vice President of India Shri M. Venkaiah Naidu “with women constituting about 50 per cent of the country's population, every effort has to be made to empower them economically, politically and in every other field” (Business Standard, 2017).

Status of Women in the Indian Society

A study of the ancient scriptures, hymns, religious books, and various literary works on the subject indicate that in the Vedic times, the women had to face a world full of paradoxes. Women enjoyed high status in early Vedic culture and it got deteriorated in the later Vedic period (Saxena & Sharma, 2018).

Although some studies point to the equal status and rights that woman enjoyed in the Vedic period i.e. 2500 B.C. to 1500 B.C. (Raju, 2017), patriarchy seems to have been the norm throughout history. Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism that were born in revolt to Hinduism though questioned some of the practices in Hinduism, by

and large, confinement and restrictions on women are prevalent in various degrees in all these religions. The contemporary India has a democratic government and a constitution that bestows women with equal rights. In India of today, the law protects a woman, her rights, and her existence, in general. The Ministry of Women and Child Development (MWCD) and the Central Social Welfare Board (CSWB) have implemented various welfare schemes and programmes for women (Banashri Mandal, 2018).

Women's Empowerment: Importance of Self Help Groups

Despite several schemes and laws to empower women, women's empowerment is still a distant dream. Women empowerment means emancipation of women from the vicious grip of social, economical, political, cast, and gender- based discrimination. It means granting women the freedom to make life choices (Raju, 2017). Empowerment is achieved by equipping women to be economically independent, self-reliant, have a positive esteem to enable them to face any difficult situation and enabling them to participate in the development activities (Rahul & Vinayagamurthy, 2020). Of all the parameters of empowerment, economic empowerment seems to be the most critical and least achieved by women, particularly in rural area and disadvantaged sections of the society. Women play a central role in any family. While discussing the differentiating features of rural and urban India, Choudhary and Rajkumar (2021) state that illiteracy, poverty and illness are huge challenges that the rural women face as compared to the urban women.

To overcome social stigmas built around women empowerment and give women the agency to break out of the shackles of subordination, entrepreneurship is an innovative and simple tool, exclusively with the help of women self-help groups (SHG) and through their efforts. To boost the participation of women in the entrepreneurship ecosystem, the government has introduced a plethora of schemes including the empowerment of women self-help groups. However, despite efforts to create a better environment for women entrepreneurs in India, arranging finances remains the single biggest challenge, where the only answer is women self-help groups especially operating in rural parts of the country.

Going by the history, the SHG movement in south India started way back 1980s. Myrada, an NGO located in South India, formed around 300 autonomous SHGs known as the Credit Management Groups. The National Bank for Agricultural and Rural development (NABARD) found SHG as an interesting and effective strategy to provide banking services to the so called 'un-bankable' people. They also launched the pilot project of linking the SHGs with Commercial Banks, based on NABARD guidelines. NABARD has pioneered several initiatives since 2004-05 to help in economic development of the poor and labour class. Main among these initiatives is: Support for training and capacity building of clients, Micro Enterprise Development Programme (MEDPs), and Conduct of Village Level Programmes (VLPs).

An SHG is essentially a formal or informal grouping of women who make regular monetary contributions so that the members of the group may be helped through collective contributions and efforts. SHGs operate both in rural and urban areas and have emerged as important micro-finance systems. As far as women are concerned, SHGs promote solidarity among them so that collectively they can address issues pertaining to finance, health and nutrition, equality and justice in domestic and local context, and development of skills and competence in specific areas and occupation. For women entrepreneurs, SHGs provide micro-loan for sustaining and expanding their business. To put it in one sentence, it would not be wrong to state that the SHGs are crusaders of people-oriented development in India.

Role Higher Education and Rural Development

Indian economy is basically rural and agricultural predominant. Rural development has an important place in the overall economic, social and cultural development of the country. (Abhishek Anand, 2018). According to the 2001 census, 74.3 per cent of the total population of India lives in about 5.5 lakh villages and about 70 per cent is directly and indirectly dependent on agriculture for their livelihood. 'Women labor in the economy and its Participation is very important. A large part of the total national product in the country is produced by women. 'Women have a relentless contribution in all areas of production. Whether we do agriculture or rural employment or want, we go to the metropolis in metros. In fact, 80 percent of the women in rural areas are basically involved in non-organized work like agriculture, animal husbandry etc.

It is generally believed that the higher education institutions with their high degree of autonomy have remained to be ivory towers (Kettunen, 2004). Most institutions of higher education have focused their activity to pursuit of scholarly activity. Their involvements in rural development have remained to be producing trained workforce. Even though this is an important role expected of them, there is room for more extensive and collaborative relationship between the university and the community in which they exist. Typically rural communities are more likely to have declining populations, depressed economies, higher poverty rates and lower percentages of college degree completion (Flora & Flora, 2008; Fluharty & Scaggs, 2007).

As stated earlier, traditionally, teaching and scholarship have been the focus of higher education. However, service has now become an expected responsibility of the university (Cohen, 1998). Service takes shape in many forms including outreach programs, service-learning courses and community partnerships.

According to Planning Commission (2021), Community engagement should not be seen as an 'addition' to learning and teaching, but intrinsic to it. This is essential if education is to be a vehicle for social transformation and attainment of social justice, rather than as means to individual prosperity alone, on the other; if education is to be a public good rather than merely a commodity. For this, institutions of higher education need to locate their learning and teaching in the communities in which they are located. Efforts are being made by the institutions of higher education in this direction. An example is the Teresian Rural Outreach Programme (TROP). This is a unique endeavour of the College, is an extension activity aimed at reaching out to the marginalized and underprivileged.

II. Conclusion

For long girls and women were educated only for traditional household works. Now, the society is witnessing changes in the role-status of women. There is greater emphasis on education of girls and women in the same way as we educate boys and men. The modern-day parents want to fulfill the aspiration of their children without gender parity. The educated women are empowered on exercising their civil, social, political and economic rights. This will help improve the overall condition of women in the society. We can hope for better days while all women of our country will be enlightened and educated. Higher Education Institutions can make a difference in the lives of women, particularly the rural women by working in collaboration with the Women's Self Help Groups whose primary aim is to improve the status of women.

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