

PERFORMANCE OF SELF HELP GROUPS IN ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT OF RURAL WOMEN

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Women in India remain one of the most disadvantaged groups in society. Viewed against almost all indicators of development, women continue to lag behind men. There are only 927 women for every 1000 men in India. Women's access to literacy and education is more limited. Of the 324 million illiterates enumerated in the 1991 census, 61 per cent were women and girls.

Devaluation of women commences at birth with the preference for male offspring and continues through a childhood of conditioning to the submissive and later on, the subservient role required of them in the marital home. A woman is never viewed as a person in her own right but always as some one's daughter, wife or mother. Specially in rural areas the problem is more severe as a rural woman not only fights for her own rights but also for the survival of her family. So far, in India whatever initiatives being taken for the poverty alleviation were based on the assumption that development that benefits men will automatically benefit women. Such lopsided efforts have denied the women, particularly rural women, access to resources and power.

In recent years the group approach to poverty alleviation is gaining recognition in Asian Countries. Mostly, women are mobilized into groups for undertaking mutually beneficial social and economic activities. The group provides the women a base for self employment and empowerment through group dynamics. In India these mutual help based groups are known as Self Help Group (SHGs).

Realizing the growing popularity of SHG concept in development interventions, a research attempt had been made to assess the performance of SHGs in women empowerment. The present paper is an endeavour entitled "Performance of SHGs in economic empowerment of rural women" to discuss the following objectives :

1. To study the profile of SHGs members.
2. To assess the performance of SHGs in economic empowerment.
3. To indentify the problems and prospects in economic empowerment.

Conceptual Farme Work : The definition of SHG as approved by National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development (NABARD), the apex banking body in India, is that "An SHG is a small, economically homogeneous and affinity group of rural poor, voluntarily formed to save and mutually agree to contribute to a common fund to be lent to its members as per group decision". SHG can be classified on the basis of the purpose of association. Different Social Scientists have Categorized them according to their goals and functions they perform. According to Blumer (1951), SHGs associated with social movements can be categorized as :—

- (i) SHGs for General Movements on large issues – lime peace, women's rights etc. Her goal is to change the values of members and public.
- (ii) SHGs for Specific movements—e.g. welfare rights organization. these SHGs have well defined objectives well. Accepted traditions and rituals and well-defined objectives well-accepted traditions and rituals and well-defined membership.

- (iii) *Expressive groups*—e.g. Alcoholics group, groups of people with cancer. The characteristics of these groups are intimate interaction and personal support which the group provides to its members. All of them work together for a desired change.

The concept of group activity is traditional in rural India. Historically, there have been groups in the villages, functioning around a particular activity for the common good of their members. In South India, a typical function of such groups was maintenance of an irrigation tank which served a number of farmers. However, in the post-independence period these informal institutions had gradually disappeared and the village population had started depending more and more on government intervention to solve their problems. According to MYRADA (2000) well functioning SHG should have following structural features :—

- ☞ An ideal SHG comprises 15-20 members.
- ☞ All the members should belong to the same socio-economic strata of society specifically poor.
- ☞ Group should bound affinity.
- ☞ Rotational leadership should be encouragement for the distribution of power and to provide leadership opportunities to all the members.
- ☞ Members attend meetings, save and participate in all activities VOLUNTARILY.
- ☞ An SHG should be socially viable institution.
- ☞ The procedure of decision making in SHGs should be democratic in nature.
- ☞ It should be non-partisan in nature.
- ☞ The proper in flow and out flow of information should be there.
- ☞ The group frames rules and regulations which are required in its effective functioning.
- ☞ All group accounts should be maintained and regularly.

'Power' is the key word of the term 'Empowerment', which means control over material assets, intellectual resources and ideology.

According to *Mayoux (1998)* "Empowerment is a continuous process where powerless people become conscious of their situation and organize to improve it and access opportunities; an outcome where women take control over their lives; set their own agenda; gain skills; solve problems; develop self reliance".

The empowerment approach of women development emphasizes that women experience oppression differently according to their race, class, colonial history and current position in the international order. It therefore maintains that women have to challenge oppressive structures and simultaneously at different levels (*Moser, 1993*).

METHODOLOGY :

The locale of the study was tribal block Kesla of district Hoshangabad in Madhya Pradesh, where 12 oldest SHGs promoted by an NGO, PRADAN (Professional Assistance for Development Action), selected for the present in depth study. The respondents were 163 women, who were the members of these SHGs selected by census method. The variables studied in profile were personal variables (age, literacy level, marital status, caste and organizational affiliation), membership variables (duration, attendance, savings, loan amount and number, position and participation) and economic empowerment variables (Access to Credit, increase in savings and income). At group-level variables were economic empowerment variables.

The data collected by interview schedule, focus group discussion (FGD), observations, PRA techniques and secondary sources which were further tabulated and statistically analyzed.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS :

1. Profile of Members : Findings of the study (Table 1) indicated that most of the respondents (73.0%) were of middle age group while 16.0% were under old category followed by young (11.0%). Most of the women (92%) were married and illiterate (96.3%). Majority (83.4%) of the members from Scheduled Tribe while only 16.6% were from Scheduled Caste. The respondents who had no affiliation with any organization were 55.8% the duration of women in their SHGs were highest (89.0%) in young category. Half of the respondents were attending the meetings regularly followed by moderate regular members. Member savings was highest (76.1%) in 'medium' category and same was the case with amount of loan (73.0%) and number of loan (69.9%). The members were almost equally distributed in three categories in position and participation in the groups majority of members were in fair category (65.0%) of access to credit. However all the members responded the increase in savings and income after joining the groups.

Table 1. Profile of SHGs' Members

Sl. No.	Variables	Frequency (N = 163)	Percentage
1.	Age :		
	Young (<25 years)	18	11.0
	Middle (25 - 47)	119	73.0
	Old (>47 years)	26	16.0
2.	Marital Status		
	Married	150	92.0
	Widow	9	2.5
	Separated	4	2.5
3.	Literacy level :		
	Illiterate	175	96.3
	Can read and write	1	0.6
	Upto Junior High School	5	3.1
4.	Caste composition :		
	S.T.	136	83.4
	S.C.	27	16.6
5.	Organizational affiliation :		
	No affiliation	91	55.8
	Affiliation	72	44.2
6.	Membership duration :		
	Young (15 months)	9	5.5
	Middle (15-40 Months)	145	89.0
	Old (>40 months)	9	5.5
7.	Attendance :		
	Irregular	28	17.2
	Moderate	53	32.5
	Regular	82	50.3

Sl. No.	Variables	Frequency (N = 163)	Percentage
8.	Member's savings :		
	Low (<394)	21	12.9
	Medium (394-1165)	124	76.1
	High (>1165)	18	11.0
9.	Loan Amount :		
	Small (<433)	25	15.3
	Medium (433-3160)	119	73.0
	Large (>3160)	19	11.7
10.	Number of loans :		
	Small (<2)	17	10.4
	Medium (2-8)	114	69.9
	Large (>8)	32	19.6
11.	Position in group :		
	Members at periphery	51	31.3
	Average members	60	36.8
	Core members	52	31.9
12.	Participation in group meeting :		
	Passive	55	33.7
	Average	48	29.5
	Active	60	36.8
13.	Access to credit		
	Poor	12	7.4
	Fair	106	65.0
	Good	45	27.6

2. Economic Empowerment : The performance of SHGs in economic empowerment is shown in Table 2. All the groups showed a good coverage of poor families (more than 75.0%) except one group Durga MS, Davdi, which had all the members form better-off category.

Attendance in two groups was above 80% however in rest of the groups it was between 58.8% to 75.0%. Except Laxmi MS, Hiranchapda the regularly of meetings in all the groups was above 75%. The performance of groups on this indicator was excellent (more than 80.0%) in all the groups except, Khedapati MS, Somukheda. The findings showed that in 8 SHGs the repayment was above 90% which is a good indicator of performance of SHGs.

Table 2. Indicators of Economic empowerment

S. No.	Name of SHGs	Non-Financial Indicator			Financial Indicators						
		Coverage of poor (%)	Attendance (%)	Regularity of meetings (%)	Repayment (%)	Contribution total credit (%)	Savings (Rs.)	Amount of lendings (Rs.)	No. of loans	Interest earned (Rs.)	Fund rotation ratio
1.	Ganga Mahila Samiti	85	70.0	88.5	90.8	39.7	23680	53290	75	7163	1.7
2.	Jamuna Mahila Samiti	94	62.5	86.5	83.3	44.8	11759	44678	86	3838	2.8
3.	Durga Mahila Samiti	76	70.5	92.7	95.9	68.2	16951	40910	71	6440	1.7
4.	Indira Mahila Samiti	100	62.5	8.61	91.4	43.7	9390	114220	55	3198	6.2
5.	Bajrang Mahila Samiti	85	70.0	95.2	92.9	28.2	13629	80180	128	7074	3.9
6.	Durga Mahila Samiti II	0	85.7	76.0	100.0	62.8	9150	25795	56	2250	2.3
7.	Laxmi Mahila Samiti I	88	58.8	69.2	87.3	21.4	8589	11165	42	543	1.2
8.	Narmada Mahila Samiti	94	68.8	81.7	95.2	16.3	11434	19440	57	2960	1.4
9.	Khedapati Mahila Samiti	92	61.5	76.0	62.6	54.7	5790	37295	61	4340	1.9
10.	Sharda Mahila Samiti	88	75.0	87.5	93.8	25.8	12590	61898	117	9485	2.8
11.	Durga Mahila Samiti III	94	58.8	84.6	81.7	58.7	14515	42300	89	6500	2.1
12.	Laxmi Mahila Samiti II	94	82.4	85.6	100.0	52.1	10710	11650	46	2244	0.9

The contribution of SHGs in total household credits was in the range of 16.3% to 68.2%. Out of 12, 8 groups have crossed their savings more than Rs. 10,000/- their life which ranges from 2 to 4½ years. The range of credit generated was in between the Rs. 11,650 to as high as 1 lacs 14 thousands. Number of loans was found in the range of 42 to 128. Earning from interest was in between Rs. 543 to Rs. 9484, however, half of the groups' interest earned was more than Rs. 4,000. Fund rotation was maximum in case of Indira MS as it was linked with external sources of credit for three times. Half of the groups' had rotated group fund for more than twice times. While in FGD, the groups were asked to summarized the changes their SHG has given to them for making them economically empowered, their answers were :

- ☞ Habit of regular savings.
- ☞ Less susceptibility to exploitation by money-lenders.
- ☞ Able to sell their non-timber forest produce (NTFP) on their own wish.
- ☞ Share in interest earned by SHG.
- ☞ Access to formal credit system, and
- ☞ Enhancement in family income through timely availability of credit or by taking up some new economic activity.

3. Problems and prospects related with economic empowerment : The problems identified by the SHGs were :-

- ☞ Irregular meetings
- ☞ Delay in repayment
- ☞ Loos in income generating activities
- ☞ Poor earning form interest in some cases and
- ☞ Poor fund rotation in some cases like Laxmi MS, Mandipura.
- ☞ Poor attendance
- ☞ Lending to outsiders
- ☞ High rate of interest for large loans

The prospects, as perceived by the SHG for its further improvement are suggested here.

1. In such cases, where fund rotation is poor, there is a need for further exploration for incorporating new avenues for better credit absorption.
2. It is suggested that interest rate should not be same for small and large amount of loan. It was one limiting factor which contoured the vision of members.
3. A habit of timely repayment should be inculcated by having a detailed discussion with the members while lending the money.
4. In one group, members expressed their convenience in taking bigger loan form money lenders, due to long duration of repayment in that case and in SHGs they constantly feel under pressure due to its strict norms.
5. Long delay in repayment was observed in the cases where groups has landed large amount of money to the members without assessing her credit-absorption capacity which can enhance the indebtedness. In such cases quality-facilitation is required from promoter organization.

CONCLUSION :

Lastly it can be briefed that, majority of members were middle aged, scheduled tribe, married, illiterate and with no organizational affiliation. Membership duration, in most cases was above 15 months. Half of them were regular member. Majority of them were having 'medium' size of savings, amount of loan, number of loan and access to credit. The repayment in majority of groups were more than 90% and except one all groups were covering more than 80% poor families. Economic empowerment was visible among the members by their habit of regular saving, less susceptibility to exploitation, access to formal credit and increase in family income. Delay in repayment and poor fund rotation rate were among the main problems faced by SHGs. The groups performance can be enhanced by quality facilitaiton, less interest rate for large loans and developing babit of timely repayment.

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