

COOPERATIVES INTERVENTION AND SOCIAL EMPOWERMENT OF INDIAN WOMEN: AN EMPIRICAL STUDY

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ABSTRACT

Empowering women politically, educationally, economically and legally has been a major objective of government of India. 11th National five Year Plan (2007-2012), for the first time in the history of Indian planning, focus has shifted from 'mere empowerment of women to recognize women as agents of sustained socio economic growth and change'. Self help groups and co-operatives are two organizational strategies often employed by underprivileged women to generate income. Through these structures, women gain access to services such as credit and training, send representatives to bodies that affect their work, and also gain a voice in political processes. Co-operatives are particularly suited to the needs of many women who desire mutual support without the formality of bureaucratic and hierarchical structures. Women have responded to lack of organization and to their exclusion from resources and services, by organizing in less structured and formal networks. (Bullock.S, 1994,p.125).

This research analyzes how participation in cooperatives allows them to exercise their choice and prioritize their needs. The paper is based on the research that includes 1098 working women from members of women cooperatives as well as women employed in unorganized sector, from four states of North West India, namely Uttarakhand, Rajasthan, Gujarat and Maharashtra. The objective is to study and compare the degree of social empowerment of women employed in cooperatives with women employed in unorganized sector.

Cooperatives have been successful in not only increasing social participation of women but also in developing their drives, initiatives and leadership qualities.

Keywords: Women empowerment, unorganized sector, self help groups

INTRODUCTION

Co-operatives are organizations set up to achieve economic and social benefits for their members through and as a group and are characterized by democratic control and the equitable distribution of both costs and benefits. The establishment and growth of co-operatives should be regarded as one of the important instruments for economic, social and cultural development as well as human advancement in developing countries. (ILO,R127,1966)

Poor women in informal settlements are often more disadvantaged than men in terms of representation and participation in decision making, income generation opportunities, physical and tenure security, shelter, and legal and human rights. Unorganized sector is highly disorganized and fragmented. This hampers women's bargaining power and fight against injustice. The National Commission on Self-Employed Women and Women Workers in the Informal Sector (NCSEW),set up in 1987 under Chairpersonship of Smt. Ela Bhatt¹noted the flagrant violation of statutory provisions regarding payment of wages, safety regulations, provision of housing and medical facilities, accident compensation against women employed in unorganized sector

Cooperatives have been playing an important role in improving the economic conditions of Indian women by providing them employment and income generating opportunities. Large number of Indian women work in unorganized sector which is unable to provide any sustainable benefits or social security. Cooperatives attempt to balance individuals' needs with those of the community as a whole by encouraging individual empowerment within the structure of membership and responsibility to the group. Without meaningful skills, social status, and economic power, they are unable to do any business on their own even with financial assistance. (The George Foundation,1995,para 6)

In a article in the International Cooperatives Alliance(ICA) Review(1997), J. Langmore says that cooperatives promote "the material conditions and well-being of members through their acting in concert; members [have] a greater say over their lives through their voluntary association in organizations controlled freely and democratically by their members." (pp.73-76)

Women's participation in the cooperative movement has increased along side the worldwide growth of this movement. Special attention was paid to the increasing role of women in co-operative development, and women's participation in co-operative institutions managed by women, or in which they play an important role, were supported by many international agencies like World Bank and UNDP. The integration of women in co-operatives received particular attention in many of these projects. (ILO,1987,pp.55-65)

OBJECTIVES

1. To study and compare the social empowerment among women employed in cooperatives with women employed in unorganized sector
2. To analyze how co operatives in every sphere of social, cultural life of women can emerge as a participatory, democratic & viable alternative to competitive, private, profit-driven, often exploitative market practices.

HYPOTHESIS

H 1: There is significant difference between the score on Social Contact of women employed in cooperatives sector and those employed in unorganized sector

Defining Variables for Study

Independent Variables : Social contact

Dependent Variable : empowerment

Operational Definition of Variables

Empowerment:

Empowerment literally means “give power to” or “to invest with power”. Empowerment is a process whereby women become able to organize themselves to increase their own self-reliance, to assert their independent right to make choices, and to control resources which assist in challenging and eliminating their own subordination.

Social contact:

It is defined as interaction with other members of community and participation in local cultural programs. Social mobility and political participation

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Women empowerment

Women’s empowerment is essential for ensuring not just their personal or household welfare, but also the wellbeing of the entire society as women are seen to be the primary guardians responsible for altering the quality and quantity of human resources available in a country to promote sustainable development in the coming generations (United Nations Population fund (UNFPA), 2005)

In 2000, at the United Nations Millennium Declaration General Assembly, the UN identified eight, Millennium Development Goals (MDG) to be achieved by year 2015. They are as follows:

- MDG 1 : Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger
- MDG 2 : Achieve universal primary education
- MDG 3 : Promote gender equality and empower women**
- MDG 4 : Reduce child mortality
- MDG 5 : Improve maternal health
- MDG 6 : Combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases
- MDG 7 : Ensure environmental sustainability
- MDG 8 : Develop a global partnership for development

Promoting gender equality and empowering women, one of the eight MDG goals, is the key to achieving the other seven goals.

The Government of India had ushered in the new millennium by declaring the year 2001 as 'Women's Empowerment Year' to focus on a vision 'where women are equal partners like men'. The last decades have witnessed some basic changes in the status and role of women in our society. There has been shift in policy approaches from the concept of 'welfare' in the seventies to 'development' in the eighties and now to 'empowerment' in the nineties. (National Policy for Empowerment of Women,2001)

Women's position and degree of empowerment is determined by the ways that gender identities, gender roles and gender relations are conceived at the family, household, community and societal levels.

Women in unorganized sector

Women workers in unorganized sector suffer under highly insecure and vulnerable working conditions. There are no social security measures to provide risk coverage and ensure maintenance of basic living standards in times of crises such as unemployment or health issues. There are no laws to ensure they work under suitable working conditions and are not subject to any health hazards. There is no fixity of working hours, no compliance to minimum wages and in most cases these are governed by local factors. (Jenna.N,n.d)

Women predominates the most vulnerable occupation and form large(and growing) chunk of home workers. They work long hours without health and safety regulation, and are not entitled to overtime rates, weekly holidays etc. as with other unorganized workers, they do not have any social protection.(National Commission for Enterprise in Unorganized Sector, NCEUS,2004, para 1.4.g.h.i)

Two lasting and disturbing impressions from the commission's tour deserve a special mention - the first is the insensitivity on part of government officials towards poor working women. The second is how invisible the women are at all levels".(Bhatt.E,1998)

Women in Cooperatives

Organizing women in form of cooperatives can be viewed as process of empowerment. The element of empowerment that distinguishes it from other concepts is agency—in other words, women themselves must be significant actors in the process of change that is being described or measured (Sen.G, 1993).

Establishment of women's self-help groups as vehicles for female empowerment is necessary. It will provide women a platform to come together to act as a pressure group, at the same time providing the members economic (e.g., credit) and social support (e.g., legal support and counseling). (Parveen. S & Leonhäuser.I, 2004,p.10)

The emergence of grassroot organization, particularly in seventies was the result of disillusionment with government programs and indifference of political parties towards women's issue. Most of them aim at creating confidence & skills so that the women themselves later take over the responsibilities of managing the cooperatives. (Mason & Karen, 1998,pp.105-133).

Social empowerment of Women

Enhancing women's status and their empowerment can play a decisive role in the success of many development programs and bring about positive social changes.

Self Help Group (SHG) movement is affecting the social dynamics of village life as seen never before. Most women reported that after their participation in SHGs they are more respected in their own families and society in general. Their contribution to the family is valued and the family in turn supports them to undertake activities like these. These women also now voice their opinions in family decisions and get heard. (Vetrivel S.C. and Mohanasundari M, 2011, p.55)

Manson, Karen (1998) studied on probability samples of urban households in Pakistan, India, Malaysia, Thailand and the Philippines, regarding women empowerment. The dimensions of women empowerment they took are women's role in household expenditure and decision making.

The study have taken independent variables as social context in terms of gender and family systems, women's land assets, participation in waged work and wife's rank relative to husband. They found out that social context has a direct and indirect effects on women's economic power. (Pp.105-133)

Malhotra.A and Mather.M, (1997) studied on women empowerment in Sri Lanka and the indicators of empowerment were women's role in household decision making and control over money matters. The independent variables are women and husband's education, participation in waged work, family structure. The findings are, work for pay and education increase decision making input in financial, but not in the social and organizational matters in the household. (pp.599-630)

Sridevi T.O (2005) studied the variables that affected the level of the empowerment of women like family type, age, education, time spend in household work, freedom of mobility, spouse age differences, educational difference with spouse, number of children, control over personal salary and supporting natal home. She recommends that the women should change their self perception more than being economically independent.

METHODOLOGY

The paper is based on research carried out using primary data directly collected from survey of women employed in cooperatives in North and West of India and women employed in unorganized sector in respective states, and the secondary data from published information and digital databases accessed through internet.

Area of Study

The study encompasses women cooperatives and self help groups in 4 states of North West India. Following is the list of women cooperatives under study:

- Himalayan Research Action Centre (HARC) in Uttarakhand.
- Rajasthan Cooperative Dairy Federation (RCDF)-SARAS in Rajasthan
- Gujarat State Women's Sewa Co operative Federation Ltd (SEWA) in Gujrat
- MarketPlace : Handwork of India (Maharashtra)

It also undertakes the simultaneous study of self employed and wage earner women in unorganized sector of these respective states.

Specification of sample design, which includes the method of selecting individual sample members, involves both theoretical and practical(e.g.cost, time, labor involved, organization) considerations.(Green.P.E,et al.,2003). The sample comprised of 568 for women employed in cooperatives and 530 for women employed in unorganized sector, i.e., a total sample of 1098 respondents.

This research study is based on natural experiment, a form of ex post facto research. The researcher approaches data collection as if a controlled experimental design were used. Empowerment of women in cooperatives is happening in natural settings, it constitutes the experimental group. The self employed women and wage earners in unorganized sector constitutes the control group.

The questionnaire was administered by interviewing members of cooperatives with assistance from facilitators (the group head, treasurer or supervisors) provided by cooperatives and federation. They also helped in identifying and conducting personal interview of women employed in unorganized sector. The type of information obtained in a questionnaire may be classified as: Basic information that relates directly to the research problem. Classification information used to classify the respondents and understand the results. Identification information includes name and address for verifying that respondents listed were actually interviewed.(Malhotra,2005)

For each group – women employed in cooperatives and women employed in unorganized sector- separate questionnaire was designed and administered.

Data Analysis: Testing of Hypothesis

Comparison between Score on Social Contact of Women Employed in Cooperatives Vs Those Employed in Unorganized Sector

This comparison is required to test the Specific Hypothesis -1

Specific Hypothesis 1: “There is significant difference between the score on Social Contact of women employed in cooperatives sector and those employed in unorganized sector”

Specifically designed seven questions on social contact parameter were asked to the respondents for assessing the level of social contact. The questions ranged from participating and taking initiatives in social programs, socializing, visiting relatives to voting in election. The results are tabulated below:

Table 1. Percentage social contact empowerment of women employed in cooperatives sector and unorganized sector

	Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
% Social Contact	Cooperative	568	67.69	17.98
	Non cooperative	530	52.12	15.48

Table 2. t-test score for comparing the level of social contact empowerment of women employed in cooperatives sector and unorganized sector

	t-test for Equality of Means		
	T	df	Sig.
% Social Contact	15.401	1089.020	.001

In the analysis of data for testing hypothesis 1 we have used statistical tool of t-test. The above table shows that level of social contact among women employed in cooperatives is 67.6% and it is 52.1% among women employed in unorganized sector.

Scores for both categories on this parameter were subjected to t-test using SPSS 15, t-value computed was found to be 15.4 with a degree of confidence > 99% or .01 significance level.

Thus specific hypothesis 1 “There is significant difference between the score on Social Contact of women employed in cooperatives sector and those employed in unorganized sector” is accepted.

FINDINGS & RESEARCH IMPLICATIONS

The social empowerment was assessed along responses to question on social participation and increased mobility, on participating and taking initiative to organize cultural programs & pujas, on being free to visit friends and family member and being confident enough to invite them home to being aware about political right & voting in elections.

Research found 57.7% of women in cooperatives take initiatives to organize cultural programs in their community as against only 10.7% of women in unorganized sector. Cooperatives have been successful in not only increasing social participation of women but also in developing drives, initiatives and leadership qualities.

All-female cooperatives, and other SHG groups, strengthen methods of group decision-making, and develop trust and self-assurance and serve as training grounds in formal participatory development.(FAO,1996). Cooperatives encourage women to actively participate in community festivals and other social functions. Women in cooperatives together celebrate many festivals, thus sharing joy and strengthening their bond.

Patriarchal modes and practices motivated by cultures and/or interpretations of religious sanctions and illiteracy hinder women’s freedom to opt for various choices to assert greater mobility in social interactions. Cooperatives help women overcome these obstacles.

Community development initiatives(like fight for safe drinking water, anti-liquor activism), is another point that differentiates members of women cooperatives from self employed and wage earners in unorganized sector. Women in marketplace have led ‘morcha’ for safe drinking water and against adulteration in ration. Women in HARC have led anti-liquor activism, which is a major bane in hilly regions, also the cause of domestic violence.

Researcher found that majority of women are conscious of their voting right and actively participate in election by exercising their right to vote, However, very few women have contested in elections.

In India, so far women’s movement has not succeeded in inducting its activists into the positions of formal power at local level. Women’s movement is not in a position to influence the choice of candidates of political parties, nor does it field its own candidates. It did not intervene into the electoral process decisively. It did not generate any electoral discourse to reach out to the masses so as to influence their voting preference. (Nnivedikar.M,2005)

More stress should also be laid on cooperatives' social function by organizing services which would relieve women of some of their tasks: child care services or drudgery-reducing

activities such as food processing, or assist with organizing marriages and other ceremonies. (FAO, the gender dimension)

Research brought to light the fact that mainstreaming and woman empowerment is central to human development. Further, the level of empowerment among members of cooperatives on all the social contact parameters was significantly higher than the level of empowerment among women employed in unorganized sector.

CONCLUSION

Women form the backbone of families and communities. The roles that women play in society are not biologically determined -- they are socially determined, although they may be justified as being required by culture or religion, these roles vary widely by locality and change over time. Social empowerment allows women to redefine these roles and gives them greater autonomy to manage their own lives. Participation in cooperatives enhances women's mobility and social interaction that leads to changes in -household decision-making. It benefits whole family and the society.

Organising women in cooperatives is key to advancing women's right and redressing the power imbalances in society. The grass root organization of cooperatives have been advocating policy reforms and projects that improve women's social mobility, provides platform for social interactions and improve their active participation in community matters. These initiatives have ripple effect benefiting society and future generations.

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