



Gender Politics and Self-Help Groups: Catalysing Women's Empowerment in Karnataka

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Abstract

The current paper examines the catalytic role of Self-Help Groups (SHGs) in unleashing Women Empowerment with special reference to Karnataka state, India. SHGs have served as strong vehicles for rural women to achieve economic autonomy, contest social norms deeply rooted in inequality and further involve themselves with local governance. Drawing from the analysis of achievements as well as struggles experienced by SHGs, this paper evaluates how they have affected gender politics and worked towards promoting a deeper form of gender justice. Specific socio-cultural and institutional constraints are highlighted in this study that undermines SHG effectiveness including traditional gender norms, resistance from patriarchal power structures and constrained access to resources. The study is based on detailed case studies undertaken in Karnataka, and provides an understanding of what makes SHGs succeed, including policy recommendations for strengthening the enabling environment and removing some overarching structural barriers that these groups face. The findings highlight SHGs as transformation agents towards sustainable social and political change, within the state (in Karnataka) and in context of India broadly; they also suggest that strategic interventions continue to be critical for successful replication and scale-up.

Keywords: Self-Help Groups (SHGs), Women's Empowerment, Gender Politics, Socio-Cultural Barriers, Economic Empowerment, Political Empowerment, Grassroots Movements.

I. Introduction

1.1. Background and Significances

In India, gender politics has been traditionally distorted by a certain socio-cultural mindset that confined the women to the public and domestic spaces (Kishwar 1996). Another phenomenon called the Self-Help Groups (SHGs) which took birth in the past few decades and has bolstered women empowerment along with questioning of gender-discriminating structures, especially at rural spaces where these groups are active predominantly. SHGs are important to break out of economic, social and political marginalization as they provide space for women to collectively organize themselves against the patriarchal nature of village structures (Agarwal 1997).

SHGs in Karnataka: Overview and Relevance to Women Empowerment

SHGs have been key in ushering women empowerment in Karnataka. The state has witnessed considerable increase in SHGs, especially among the rural women, making them economically self-reliant and also give affordable fight to social evils besides participating in local governance (Ramesh 2006). The successful operation of SHGs in Karnataka has shown that these groups have the ability to affect women-related political issues and can make a positive difference for many women from nearby areas.

1.2. Purpose and Objectives

The focus of this paper is on the kind of influence that SHGs have in Karnataka on the gender politics and whether they act as an instrument for women empowerment or not. This research will focus on the processes through which SHGs enhance women's economic, social and political empowerment as well their wider contributions to gender equality (Puhazhendhi & Satyasai, 2001).

What have SHGs accomplished or not in addressing gender inequality and why?

Additionally, this paper seeks to explore the opportunities and difficulties of SHGs in their potential contribution towards addressing gender inequality issues at state level-Mayannavar & Kelkar (2011). It is also likely that analysing the constraints in SHG such confines and contributory limitation offers sign to formulators regarding how they characterize their purpose which might be proponent bucks at large (Hassan, 2010). Given this background, the present investigation will try revealing some of these peculiar strategies.

II. Literature Review

2.1. Gender Politics in India

Over the years, gender politics in India has matured with different movements demanding equal rights and larger political representation for women (Kumar 1993). This work has informed the feminist movement in India, which similarly foregrounds questions of gender-based violence, political representation and economic inequities that frame debates about equality between men and women (Desai 2002).

The participation of women in the political processes and challenges:

Notwithstanding the introduction of a number of legal provisions providing for representation and participation (eg reservation for women in Panchayati Raj Institutions i.e PRIs), many factors seem to inhibit political involvement by them, such as patriarchal discrimination, lack of resources and educational opportunities etc (Buch 2000). These challenges have compromised their ability to access and participate in the political processes therefore impacting decision-making at different levels (Vijayalakshmi, 2002).

2.2. Self Help Groups: Introduction and Performance

Background: Self-Help Groups (SHGs) are small, voluntary associations of women mostly from the rural areas that come together to save money and pool their own resources in order to be able to access credit/ loan for socioeconomic activities. The main purposes of SHGs in the form of economic empowerment through microfinance, social empowerment by bargaining collectively and political Empowerment by organizing community to assert for participation in local governance process (Puhazhendhi & Satyasai 2001).

SHGs and Women: Firmer in their Economical and Social Faces

SHGs contributed a great deal to empowering women in India both economically and socially. They have provided women with more economic autonomy, the opportunity to develop income-generating project and contribute to a higher standard of living for their family (Shylendra 1999). Socially, SHG's help women to influence their traditional gender roles and increase self-confidence as well provides a platform for the integrated development of the community (Mayoux 2001).

2.3. Gender Politics and SHGs

SHGs have been identified to significantly contribute in addressing gender issues by providing women with the resources and support necessary for challenging existing gender inequities (Agarwal, 1997). SHGs have been proven most effective for advocacy of women rights, entrenching them in local governance and promoting pro-women policies (Das, 2013).

What the literature gaps are with respect to Karnataka:

Nevertheless, the literature lacks detailed reflections on role of SHGs in shaping gendered politics specifically in Karnataka. A large body of work has contributed to the analysis and documentation on various aspects like economic benefits from SHGs; however, more research is required to

explore how they act as an instrument for catalysing social capital towards political responsiveness within Karnataka's unique socio-political environment (Ramesh 2006).

III. The Context of Karnataka

3.1. Socio-Political Landscape

The type of socio – political landscape is oscillated widely and gender dynamics also have variation among different regions in Karnataka. Though the state has made advancements in championing women's rights, more lately through launching different government schemes but still embedded patriarchal norms are shaping picture of gender relations (Rao, 2005). This situation has opened up windows of opportunity as well thrown him in the whirlwind of challenges to empower through SHGs (Bharadwaj, 2000).

SHGs in Karnataka: Status, Problems and Way Forward

The increase in the SHGs was higher especially among rural women with limited access to formal financial institutions alongside social restrictions on her mobility and public functions (Siddiqui, 2008). The Sree shakti program of the government has been a key factor in establishing and maintaining SHGs as important change agents within the state (Rao, 2005).

The working group has identified resources and programs that may be helpful, thus provided based on government as a non-government initiative.

3.2. Main Programmes in support to SHGs/ Women Empowerment in Karnataka

SHGs in Karnataka received support from many government programs over the years (Reddy & Manak, 2005), including both financial and technical services as well as capacity building — for example through the Sree Shakti Scheme or Karnataka Rural Livelihoods Mission. The programs are broadly intended to increase women's economic autonomy and political involvement, embedded in larger equality goals for gender representation.

3.3. NGOs and civil society have played a great role in promotion of SHGs.

Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and civil society organizations have been an integral part of the SHG promotion in Karnataka. The support systems offered by these outfits in the spheres of training, advocacy and networking are vital as they assist SHGs manoeuvring through a difficult socio-political landscape (Agarwal 1997). The partnership with govt., NGOs and SHGs have performed an instrumental role in promoting women's empowerment within the state (Shylendra, 1999).

IV. Empowering Women through SHGs

4.1. Economic Empowerment

The influence of SHGs is fairly evident in Karnataka with its small-time entrepreneurs especially women taking the microcredit option. These economic activities not only create a source of income for SHG members but also enhance their status in the family and community (Puhazhendhi & Satyasai, 2001). The SHG have provided economic empowerment to women which has enabled her to contribute in the income of household, reduce their dependency on male member and increased decision-making power (Shylendra: 1999)

Successful SHG-based economic initiatives in Karnataka -Case studies

A classic example of this is the successful progress in SHGs especially amongst women who have benefited from an assortment range of small enterprises (viz. Dairy farming, handicrafts etc,) initiated and linked to both SHG networks as well microfinance & credit market particularly evident in Dakshina Kannada & Udupi districts (Ramesh 2006). These have not only translated into economic benefits but also stand as examples of how collective action can contribute to development in a more sustainable, environment friendly manner.

4.2. Social Empowerment

SHGs in Karnataka have also been a vehicle for social empowerment, where women collectively work to challenge entrenched beliefs and gender biases. By harnessing the power of group action, SHG members have been able to tackle issues such as domestic violence, child marriage and their right to education (Mayoux, 2001). As groups exercised their rights, the women within those participating self-help-growth heard from other voices that began to validate information in turn

what was occurring around them the result of which led to greater awareness and an emboldened voice against injustice this change has caused a shift on how society perceives gender equality (Rao 2005).

Contribution of Women in Educating, Healthcare and social awareness issue:

SHGs have been important for spreading education, health and social awareness among the women of Karnataka. Several SHGs have launched community development programs on literacy, health services provision and social awareness such as reproductive health and sanitation (Siddiqui "MSMEs in Development" 2008). These practises not only have improved the well-being of SHG Members but also extended to community development.

4.3. Political Empowerment

Another major output has been the political empowerment of women through SHGs, with hundreds of members elected into local governance structures like Panchayats. Through SHGs, women have been better informed and trained in political participation to run for elections as well as influence local-level decision making (Vijayalakshmi 2002). Such participation has resulted in placing women's concerns within local agendas and also demanding the accountability of governance at a local level to satisfy administrative needs for services by correcting specific problems such as Rao (2005) observe.

The ways in which SHGs impact policy making and women rights advocacy.

SHGs have not only been involved in local governance but also shaped policy-making and women's rights at the state level. SHGs in Karnataka have been able to successfully influence gender policies and women's rights through campaigns, public forums, engaging with policymakers (Reddy & Manak 2005). These efforts have helped a great deal in creating an environment of gender sensitivity and awareness amongst the policy makers of state.

V. Challenges and Barriers

However, SHGs in Karnataka run into several socio-cultural obstacles that effectively neutralize their ability to empower women. Role play of members as dictated by neo-traditional gender norms and cultural practices all left women in very defined places within the household from which they often could not join SHGs. These societal norms contribute to, which in turn influence their participation and benefits from SHG initiatives as women are expected to abide by domestic duties (over public or economic work) more often than not. Moreover, gender norms that empower men might limit the effectiveness of women's decision-making in SHGs, restricting their autonomy and transformational power over group process.

Further, they face resistance from traditional power structures. Political resistance may also be potent if local elites and patriarchal institutions see SHGs as destructive to the root order of society. This resistance could take many forms, some of which may include male family members community leaders or even local authorities trying to demotivate the women by considering it as a challenge against their authority. This opposition can put a SHG into significant impediments, hampering its objectivity to effect considerable changes in the communities where they work.

Apart from these sociocultural barriers, SHGs must also grapple with several institutional and structural challenges that inhibit they're not just growth but continued existence as well. One of the main challenges is that a lot of SHGs are underfunded, and they do not receive necessary training programmes or technical support to run successfully. In the absence of these resources, SHGs may not only find it difficult to continue their operations but also struggle to extend successful pilots and mechanisms that benefit larger sections in due course. Institutional barriers such as bureaucratic delays, poor coordination between government departments and SHGs may also pose a challenge to scale-up that could prevent successful models being copied in other regions.

VI. Case Studies from Karnataka

There are many success stories in Karnataka where SHGs have played a significant role of on women's empowerment. For instance, in DK-Udupi districts, SHGs were successful as women started small thriving businesses such as dairy farming and handicrafts. These activities not only

gave economic opportunity to the women who did them, but they also made these woman heroes in their communities. The achievements of these SHGs highlighted that local resources could be organically mobilised on extensive scale using microfinance and collective action to generate long term sustainable livelihoods.

Along with this economic progress of the SHGs, some in Karnataka have also taken remarkable actions on social issues related to domestic violence, child marriage and education. These SHGs provide women a voice, where they can discuss their problems and seek help with the assurance of at least being heard — even if not helped; because by ‘talking’, these institutions have managed to pierce through this opaque glass-house deeply rooted into our Marwari social norms over generations. By pushing for the education of girls and advocating on behalf of women, these organizations have helped inform communities about women's rights in all its dimensions: health; societal roles; family roles -- which has led to broader community development.

These successful SHGs have experiences to offer that can be informative lessons for any fresh confidence- building venture. The mayor said strong leadership, valid community input and judicious use of local resources were crucial in the successful projects. However, they had to surmount formidable obstacles including socio-cultural resistance and limited resources in their quest for success. The lessons from how these challenges were tackled can help other SHGs to achieve similar results. The case studies provide additional evidence about the need to tailor SHG activities to work within structural constraints in order for them produce intended quality and sustainability outcomes.

VII. Policy Recommendations

Better support systems are required in a manner to multiply the effects of SHGs on gender politics, thereby furthering women empowerment in Karnataka. For this, the funds have to be channelised in several ways to ensure more SHGs are trained and they get proper linkage with government projects. With required resources, and institutional support SHGs could emerge as an effective institution capable of larger scale impact reaching several populations. Further, this collaborative arrangement between SHGs and NGOs can be scaled by promoting partnerships with local governments to create broader solutions for addressing gender imbalances.

The constraints of SHGs due to socio-cultural factors are widespread and interventions require targeted strategies that empowers people, be it from traditional gender norms or mechanisms that show larger community needs. Advocacy and awareness building campaigns can help to shift cultural norms towards greater acceptance of women in economic and social positions. INCONUS Socialization with the participation of men and traditional leadership in these initiatives is also crucial so that their support can be mobilized to elicit acceptance of SHG intervention. Gender-sensitive approaches should also be mainstreamed in all SHG activities so that women feel heard and respected which contributes to creating a more inclusive space for their engagement, empowerment.

Future work should also examine the lasting consequences of SHGs on empowerment at later stages of rural women's lives. Such intersectional studies of caste, class and patriarchy in particular may help us to understand these better with respect to the SHGs. Furthermore, investigating the potential of technology and digital platforms in broadening both access to SHGs as well as their effectiveness could reveal novel pathways by which existing constraints may be overcome along with extending influence. These are the gaps of research that could be addressed to inform better intervention and policy decisions by policymakers in supporting further growth as well success trajectories for SHGS contributions towards achieving gender equity.

VIII. Conclusion

The success story of women empowerment achieved through a cadre of Self-Help Groups in Karnataka. Their activism has helped women secure a livelihood, break social boundaries and participate in mainstream development. Indeed, many SHGs have broken through formidable sociocultural and institutional barriers to achieve transformational outcomes highlighting the potential of collectively-led action in addressing entrenched gender disparities. Karnataka has both

become a successful model and offered lessons for both the ways in which SHGs can expand as well, but this expansion carries with it its own set of successes and challenges that provide valuable information into what future efforts to do so should consider in order to overcome some of challenges involved.

The wider implications of this research may be significant for gender politics in India, with the suggestion that SHGs could have valuable roles to play here too. Given the role that women play in advocating for their rights and taking up leadership position, SHGs have a contribution to make towards more inclusive society. Its potential is under tapped, however – a future that gets fulfilled will depend on sustained backing from both government and civil society to break the socio-cultural barriers restricting women in entrepreneurship. Based on the experience in Karnataka, insights can be drawn to inform the strategy for designing future SHG programs that will work better if scaled up elsewhere.

SHGs There is great potential for SHGs to effect long-term social and political change in Karnataka (and even further afield). These groups, as they broaden and take further of an interest in the broader discourse on gender will continue to be key players in determining where India goes from here with respect to our journey towards achieving gender equality. Addressing the challenges they face and building on their successes can help SHGs create a fairer society for all.

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