
ROLE OF VOLUNTARY AGENCIES IN GENDER EMPOWERMENT

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Abstract

The role of civil society organizations in addressing issues impeding the path of development is gaining in significance. These organizations being voluntary in nature have come to be viewed as guardians of democracy, guarding the masses against possible aggressions by the state or the usurpation of individual human rights. Within the discourse of development, the concept of 'gender empowerment' is gaining in momentum and civil society organizations, specifically NGOs are playing a lead role in the social upliftment of the marginalized sections of the society. On account of their close proximity with the masses, the NGOs are expected to voice the concerns of the marginalized women, thereby becoming instrumental in ensuring social equity and justice.

With the 'accountability gap' noticeable in the NGO functioning, it is fruitful to analyze beneficiary responses in order to gain insights into their actual mode of functioning. The women respondents in the study conducted to assess the role and performance of the NGO in operation in the area of the study, opine that they have gained from their membership in the SHGs formed by CYSD. The extent of 'empowerment' of the beneficiary respondents can be deciphered from the level of self-reliance and the efforts made by them for becoming independent. The achievement should be judged considering the impediments posed by the structural and ideological constraints engrained within patriarchy.

Keywords: Civil Society, NGOs, Gender Empowerment, SHGs,

Introduction:

Any comprehension about the contemporary discourse on civil society can be traced to the formation of mediating agencies or associations. At a broad theoretical/ academic level, the civil society is understood as the 'space' responsible for the identification and privileging agencies like the market, social movements and cultures whose effective causality is heavily local. Within democracy, as distinct from the state, the civil society emerges from the masses. And thus, has potentials for bringing the desired social and economic changes in the society by an empathetic understanding about the needs of the masses. To quote Chandhoke, the function of the civil society in a democratic setup is,

“Civil society is not an institution: it is rather a process whereby the inhabitants of the sphere constantly monitor both the state and the monopoly of the power within itself. Democratic movements have to be constantly widen the spaces where undemocratic practices can be criticized and for this they have to exercise both vigilance and criticality.”
(Chandhoke 2004: 57)

Chandhoke’s observation about the notion of civil society can be interpreted as a process; as a set of correlated socio-political events leading to the emergence of associations undertaking the responsibility of monitoring the activities of the state on the hand and checking the possible excesses within the association itself. Another interpretation that can be made, is that the associations formed are fluid without any well-defined structural hierarchy marking its functioning. The right to ‘associate’ accrues from the principles of democracy, from the state in the form of ‘rule of law’, rights and the idea of justice. In broad terms, the civil society can be perceived as the means to establish a checks and balance mechanism in the society against the possible usurpation of power by either the state or any other association. Its significance is further escalated when viewed as a precondition for democracy. In this role, it may not be viewed as battling for individual rights vis-à-vis the state alone but also as battling out coercive forces as and when they emerge within the sphere. Thus, it acts like a guardian or protector of individual rights and dignity.

Mouzelis believes a strong civil society advocates for the rule of law to protect individuals from state arbitrariness. It comprises of strongly organized non-state groups which check the abuse of power by the state machinery. He also advocates for a balanced pluralism within the civil society which minimize the scope for absolute dominance by particular interest groups. The ‘sphere’ acts as a mediator between the government and the private sector and helps conflicting institutions and belief systems to evolve mutually acceptable formulae for operation. These resolve the contradictions generated by the democratic state.

Gellner does not conceive of the notion of civil society as opposed to the state. Instead, he observes that an effective welfare state enables the smooth functioning of the civil society. He believes that the civil society has the strength to counter-balance the state. But this sphere does not impede the state from performing its routine functions in maintaining law and order and dominating over the masses in being the arbiter between conflicting interests. Thus viewed, the presence of civil society allows room for free operation of the state as well as allowing for the protection of individual interests.

The civil society provides an arena for articulating the voices of the voiceless by challenging and contesting dominant priorities. It influences public negotiations for public good and can also ensure state and market accountability. The growth of civil society organizations is thus a triumph of democracy.

The rise of Non-Government Organizations (NGOs) is a marked feature of the development process in the 1980’s. Kilby (2011) observes that the NGOs in India and the state have shared a reciprocal relationship. Indian governments, both colonial and post-colonials have fostered the development of NGOs both in terms of their functioning and the antagonistic relationship with the state as well. NGOs in turn have played a vital role in shaping the state. Nandedkar observes that the NGOs are voluntary organizations with an institutional base. They are

private organizations and are registered with the state. However, there is no central mechanism to determine the level of registration-whether at the local, state or at the national level.

Conceived as above NGOs can be perceived as the life force of the civil society. In terms of self-perception, NGOs promote certain values, those representing the interests of the broader community. They are ‘public benefit’ organizations rather than ‘mutual benefit’ organizations like trade unions or cooperatives, observes Kilby. For the NGOs working to achieve development goals, issues like poverty alleviation, protection of human rights and community marginalization form the agenda of their activity. As pointed out by Kilby, NGOs lack a well-defined accountability path. This implies that they are not accountable to the aid recipient for the practices and strategies adopted by them for accomplishing the public benefit cause.

Adapting to Couto’s classification of NGOs in US, Kilby figures out the following set of groups in the Indian context,

- *grassroots groups, which are small community-based, self-help groups which can act for themselves as direct ‘socio-political representatives.*
- *community agencies, which have local decision-making structures, but with little direct representation or full participation of the people served; and,*
- *voluntary organizations, large organizations which generally have no formal feedback mechanisms from the people being served. (Kilby: 2011)*

In India, the civil society has been viewed as the upsurge of popular movements against the state; as a fluid association of social grouping based on religion, caste and kinship relations or on religious mobilizations. Omvedt conceived of these new social movements as the movement of the ignored or exploited groups having broad-based organization, structure and ideology to bring about the desired social change. Defining the characteristics of development NGOs in India, Siddharth Sen maintains that,

“...NGOs can be defined as organizations that are generally formed by professionals or quasi-professionals from the middle or lower-middle classes, either to serve or work with the poor, or to channel financial support to community-based or grassroots organizations of the poor. The NGOs are generally non-membership organizations and have salaried employees.”
(Sen,S 1999:332)

As implied from the above, NGOs are not collectives of the marginalized sections of the society with the intention of fighting for collective identity and rights. Instead, they organizations formed to act as intervening agents to promote the cause of the marginalized sections of the society and ameliorate the hardships faced by them. Within the paradigm of development, the research data indicates the gender empowerment initiatives undertaken by CYSD and the formation of Self-Help Groups (SHGs). The Centre for Youth and Social Development (CYSD) is a leading NGO in Bhubaneswar, Odisha and the data collected represents the opinion of the beneficiary members of the groups formed by CYSD in four slum localities of Bhubaneswar, the capital city in the Khurda district of Odisha.

Findings and Observations:

The formation of SHGs through NGO intervention aimed at the targets of gender empowerment. The formation and functioning of the SHGs under study can be deciphered from their impact on the lives of the beneficiary respondents in the first place. The responses to the propositions in the questionnaire reveal the following information in table no.1.

Table No.1**SHGs and Change in Women's Lives**

Proposition	No:of Respondents		
	Agree	Disagree	Total
Improvement in awareness level regarding avenues of income, health hygiene etc..	80 (100)	-	80
SHG membership has improved women's status in the family and community	80 (100)	-	80
Working by Women is no longer considered a social taboo	80 (100)	-	80
SHG membership has reduced domestic violence	74 (92.50)	06 (7.50)	80
SHG membership has reduced incidences of dowry, harassments/deaths etc	11 (13.75)	69 (86.25)	80
SHG membership has brought self-confidence in members	79 98.75)	1 (1.25)	80

Note: The numbers in parentheses are percentages of the total number of respondents

Analyzing the data in table no.1, it can be ascertained that

- The awareness level of the women members has increased an account of participation in SHG activities. All the respondents have agreed to the proposition which indicates that the NGOs have succeeded in spreading awareness about avenues of income, women's health and education, environmental cleanliness, gender discrimination and related issues.
- The total disagreement of all the respondents with two propositions asked elsewhere in the questionnaire "*Educating the girl child is not very essential, as she will have to get married ultimately*" and "*A working girl does not find a suitable marriage*

partner” indicates the importance of education of women accorded by the respondents. Marriage as an institution for women is accorded utmost importance within the cultural ethos as it acts as the agency for social identity and protection. Defying the cultural norms, the emancipatory values of education have gained in priority. Likewise, the findings also indicate that the income-earning capabilities nurtured through education have been prioritized by the respondents.

- SHG membership has accorded a status and identity to the women members within their immediate surroundings. All the respondents are in agreement with the proposition stated in the table. During informal discussions, the respondents disclosed that they were overwhelmed by the warm response of government officials whenever they approached them for some work.
- Women have come to believe that working outside home for an earning is no longer a taboo. This marks a deviation from the traditional and orthodox belief systems limiting women to the confines of the home. The idea of ‘working women’ has received approval both at the family and community level. This indicates that the society is undergoing transformation with respect to the age-old gender inequalities, at least acknowledging the capabilities of women as bread-earners.
- As the data in the table indicates, SHGs have become instrumental in reducing the intensity of domestic violence. As the respondents reveal, the SHGs act as pressure groups to deter violent behavior of drunk husbands of married women. At the community level, social problems like alcoholism have recorded reduced incidences on account of the SHG movement in the locality.
- The SHG movement has not managed to reduce incidents of dowry as a form of atrocity against women. Approximately 86.25% of the respondents in the study disagree with the proposition “*SHG membership has reduced incidents of dowry, harassment/death etc*”. This indicates that the social status and resultant earning abilities as SHG members has not been accompanied by an attitudinal change in the patriarchal ideology within the institution of marriage and family.
- SHG membership of women has led to an increase in the awareness level of children. The ‘mothers’ are the primary socializing agents and with an increased level of awareness, they are better-positioned to provide guidance and make their children aware about their surroundings.

Summary and Conclusion

The findings of the study shows that the NGO intervention in the area of gender empowerment has succeeded to a great extent although much remains to be done to accomplish the goal. The objectives of NGOs within the paradigm of development (of which gender empowerment is an integral part) is well-defined to reduce inequalities and uplift the marginalized sections of the society.

CYSD has managed to create awareness among women about their rights and the means to realize the self-worth which is an important component of capacity-building. The rise in the level of self-confidence, self-awareness among the members of the SHG groups indicates the success of the NGO activities. Women have realized the significance of ‘work’ outside the home taken up responsibilities in the public sphere apart from the designated domestic sphere

of activity. In the activities of the NGO in the study, can be located the site of mediation, of contestation, where the contesting ideologies with respect to the status of women within patriarchy are effectively transformed towards upliftment. Through awareness generation regarding the values of self-reliance among women (by embracing the public sphere of activity), the mediating efforts of the NGO for promoting values of social equity and justice are evident. However, as suggestive from the findings of the study, structural changes in patriarchal institutions of marriage and family still remain to be accomplished for realizing the goals of empowerment in the true sense.

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