

Women's Empowerment through SHGs – Characteristics & Levels

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ABSTRACT

Empowerment of women is an important researchable issue in India. Empowerment is viewed as both a process and the result of the processes. It is transformation of the structures or institutions that reinforces and perpetuates gender discrimination. The empowerment of rural women through SHGs would give benefits not only to the individual women but also for the family and community as a whole by means of collective action for development. The present study was conducted in Medziphema rural development block under Dimapur district of Nagaland. A total of twenty one SHGs were randomly for the study purpose. A well structured schedule was used to collect the data from the respondents by personal interview method. The study revealed characteristic features of women's empowerment which was evident in form of increase in income level, improvement in skills and knowledge and increased capacity to meet daily household expenses. Majority of the respondents exhibited medium level of empowerment.

Keywords

Self help groups, women, empowerment, features.

INTRODUCTION

Women's empowerment is a global issue attracting the attention of researchers. Empowerment is a term widely used in the context of women who are equal partners in development of the society and the nation. Women as a significant human resource can play their role effectively if they are provided equal opportunities and status as those of the men (Kaur *et al.* 2007). The concept of women's empowerment is the outcome of several important critiques and debates generated by the women's movement throughout the world, particularly by the third world feminists. Rapid progress in SHG formation has now turned into an empowerment movement among women across the country (Biswas, 2007). Empowerment is a process that enables women to gain access to and control of materials as well as information resources. Empowerment is also the process of challenging existing power relations and of gaining greater control over the sources of power. In today's global society, pressures for empowerment are growing.

The empowerment theme runs strongly through all the literature, policy documents, planned initiatives etc. Emancipation of women is a pre-requisite for nation's economic development and social upliftment. The role of women and the need to empower them are central to human development programmes. Ever since independence, a number of innovative schemes have been launched for the upliftment of women in India. In spite of the safeguards provided in many of the poverty alleviation programmes, it was observed that women in rural areas especially from poor families could not be benefitted. The self-help group is a viable organization set up to disburse micro-credit to the rural women for the purpose of making them enterprising and encouraging to enter into entrepreneurial activities. The formation of SHG is not a micro credit project but an empowerment process.

Empowering women is not just for meeting their economic needs but also for more holistic social development. The SHGs empower women both socially and economically. They encourage women to participate in decision-making in the household, community and local democratic sector and prepare women to take up leadership positions. Thus the present study was taken up with an objective to know about the features of women's empowerment among the rural women in Dimapur district of Nagaland.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

A few research work on Self Help Group have been done in Nagaland so far. Therefore this research work is concerned with the exploration of SHG and their role in making women politically, socially and economically strengthened. Due to various reasons such as economic backwardness, social exploitation, women are not able to contribute much to the society. So, SHG can provide the forum for these women to bring them together, develop their inner potential and bring about the desirable changes in their family/community and secure a place for herself in the society.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. What are the characteristic features of women empowerment through SHGs?
2. What is the level of women's empowerment?

3. What can be done to bring increased rate of women's empowerment ?

METHODOLOGY

Research design

Ex-post facto research design was followed for conducting the present study.

Sample

The present study was conducted in the Dimapur district of Nagaland. Out of the four rural development (RD) blocks under Dimapur district, Medziphema (RD) block was randomly selected for the present study. Two villages viz., Medziphema and Diphupar were selected randomly from the Medziphema rural development block. A total of 21 SHGs, which were in operation for at least four years were selected randomly from these two villages. Five members were selected randomly from each of the 21 SHGs making a total sample size of 105 respondents.

Instruments

A well structured pre-tested interview schedule was developed for collecting data from the respondents according to the objectives of the study. Data were collected from the respondents by conducting personal interview.

Analysis

Data obtained from the respondents were coded, tabulated and classified. Further, statistical analysis was done using SYSTAT 12 software for calculating frequency, percentage, mean and standard deviations. Empowerment level of the respondents was obtained by classifying them based on mean and standard deviations.

Results

Table 1 revealed that SHGs were successful to a great extent in empowering the women. It had a great impact (100%) on income level of the respondents. Increase in the income level of the respondents made them and their family financially secure and to lead better lives. This is in line with the findings of Naidu & Dasartharamaiah (2006) and Singh (2013). 99.04 per cent of the SHGs had witnessed improvement in skills and knowledge on various aspects which they were not aware of before joining SHG. This might be due to various activities they had undertaken,

training exposure and constant interaction with their group members which facilitated exchange of knowledge. 97.14 per cent of the members witnessed increased capacity to meet the daily household expenses. This could be due to the fact that those commodities which they could not purchase earlier, now were within their purchasing power as a result of increased income through various economic activities undertaken through their respective SHGs. This helped the SHG members and their family members to lead a comfortable life. 72.38 per cent of the members had purchased some assets after joining SHG as they could save some amount of their earnings from SHG activities. 85.71 per cent of the members had experienced improvement in their health and nutrition after joining SHG. This might be due to intake of better diet and better medical facilities in times of sickness. 12.38 per cent of the members had enrolled their children to better school after joining SHG. 33.33 per cent of the members could shift their children to better schools after joining the SHG. This might be due to the fact that the members could afford better school after joining SHG. 85.71 per cent of them experienced increased access to the productive resources. 40.95 per cent of the members had witnessed freedom from domination within the family after joining SHG. This might be due to increase in their confidence to voice out their rights and opinions amongst the family members which they could not do earlier. 81.90 per cent of the members were actively involved in decision making in the household after joining SHGs. Their views were being taken into account and they were treated as equal partners in making household decisions along with other family members. None of the members had witnessed participation in decision making within community and village. Decisions in community and village are being taken by the males since time immemorial and this practice is still going on. As such the women folk are accustomed to it and do not bother to take part in it. 15.23 per cent of the members had experienced availability of better status and respect in the society after joining SHG. The respondents were of the opinion that they could see the change in people's attitude towards them because of their improved financial status. Though 17.14 per cent of members had experienced increase in their ability to voice out their grievances in their community but none of the members were found to voice out their grievances in the village as it had been dominated by the males since time immemorial.

Table 1: Distribution of respondents based on the features of empowerment

Sl. No.	Features of empowerment	Frequency	Percentage
1	Increase in income level	105	100
2	Improvement in skills and knowledge	104	99.04
3	Increased capacity to meet daily household expenses	102	97.14
4	Purchase of new assets	76	72.38
5	Improvement in health and nutrition	90	85.71
6	Enrolment of children to better school	13	12.38
7	Shifting of children to better school	35	33.33
8	Increased access to productive resources	90	85.71
9	Freedom from domination within the family	43	40.95
10	Participation in decision making in household	86	81.90
11	Participation in decision making in the village	0	0
12	Participation in decision making in the community	0	0
13	Availability of better status in the society	16	15.23
14	Increased ability to organize and voice their grievances in the village	0	0
15	Increased ability to organize and voice their grievances in the community	18	17.14
16	Increased political and legal awareness	77	73.33
17	Involvement in political campaigning and protest	59	56.19
18	Increased ability to take up leadership position in a community	9	8.57
19	Increased ability to take up leadership position in a local democratic sector	0	0

73.33 per cent of the members experienced increased political and legal awareness after joining SHG. Most of them were not aware of any of their rights, but due to interaction with outside world and the group members, they came to realise many of their rights and to stand for it. 56.19 per cent of the members had access to involve in political campaign and protest after joining SHG due to the influence of their friends and their realisation that women could also be actively involved in politics and become equal partners along with men. Many of the women were of the opinion that women could organize more effective political campaigns and could prove as better politicians due to their sensibility and tolerant nature. 8.57 per cent of the members had taken up leadership positions in their community after joining SHG due to their realisation of the fact that women need to come out of their homes if they have to be a part of the society and go hand in hand with the males in our modern society. None of the members had taken up leadership position in local democratic sectors, and hence political empowerment of women was very discouraging. It might be due to the fact that women taking part in politics are looked down and are not being supported by majority of the people, especially the male counterparts in our rural society.

Table 2: Distribution of respondents based on their level of empowerment

Sl. No.	Level of empowerment	Frequency	Percentage
1	Low	19	18.09
2	Medium	75	71.42
3	High	11	10.47
	Total	105	100

It was evident from the Table 2 that majority of the respondents (71.42%) had experienced medium level of empowerment, 18.09 per cent of the respondents had low empowerment level and 10.47 per cent of the respondents had experienced high level of empowerment. The medium level of empowerment might be due to increase in the income level leading to improved living standards, capability to meet the daily household expenses, better medical facilities, skill up gradation, purchase of new assets, political and legal awareness etc. The medium level of empowerment enabled them to gain confidence in themselves, come out of their house and take part in social activities, made contribution towards the financial needs of their families, better communication skills and also made them aware of their rights.

Table 2 also revealed that participation in SHG activities had great impact on the members. The study revealed an increase in social recognition of self, status of family in the society, size of social circle and involvement in intra family and entrepreneurial decision making. There was an increase in self reliance and independence of rural women due to the involvement in the entrepreneurial and other activities of SHGs. A tremendous change and success in the lives of the members and their families has been brought by the SHGs.

CONCLUSION

Empowerment is a process and not an event. Each phase or step maybe an effort by itself. It can be built gradually by constructing each step solidly. The progress of the whole process depends on various factors in a given society in which such a process of empowerment is trying to take place. It can be both self initiated or initiated by others. By

empowerment, women would be able to develop confidence, realise their potential and enhance their self esteem. SHGs have the power to create a socio-economic revolution in the rural areas of our country. SHGs have not only produced tangible assets and improved living conditions of their members, but have also helped in changing much of their social outlook and attitudes. In the present study, SHGs have served the cause of women empowerment, social solidarity and socio-economic betterment of the rural poor. The findings revealed that the rural women folk who were the members of different SHGs had experienced increase in their income, expenditure, enrolment and shifting of children to better schools, purchase of new assets, improvement in health and nutritional status of the family; which is indicative of the fact that they have been empowered economically through the formation of SHG and as such they are able to live more comfortably and lead a better life. The respondents had also experienced social empowerment through SHG which can be seen through their participation in social activities, gatherings, trainings, constant interaction with the group members, which they had not done earlier and as such they had gained higher confidence level in themselves and they can see the changes in the people's attitude towards them. A careful analysis of the study bring forth the most important dimension of political empowerment of the respondents. Political empowerment which is another objective of formation of SHG has not been achieved to the desired level. Political empowerment of women through SHG was very negligible and the reason being the seclusion of women from the political power right from the inception of the society. Their domestic focus combined with modesty as a primary virtue kept the women away from politics since time immemorial and this trend is still being followed even in our modern society. Government should take proper measures in this regard so that women can participate in these fields with equal footings with their male counterparts.

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