

PARTICIPATION OF WOMEN THROUGH SHGs IN JORHAT DISTRICT OF ASSAM

Alful Koushik Goswami
Research Scholar, Dibrugarh University

Abstract

UNDP has supported a lot of activities to vanish women's poverty in some projects. In India, these projects have been implementing since 1994. All over India, there are huge number of poor women are involving in self help groups (SHG's). In Jorhat district of Assam up to 2010 march, there are 12607 self help group. In this district sc., st., backward, BPL and widow women are involving in self help groups. In this study strength, weakness and opportunities of SHG's of Jorhat districts will be discussed field study was also carried out to collect some valuable information with that regards.

Keywords : *Jorhat District, Self Help Groups, Participation of Women, SWOT analysis.*

Introduction:

The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), has supported a range of activities to eradicate women's poverty directly in some projects. The projects and programmes focuses on micro credit schemes, technical trainings, organization of self help groups (SHGs) on pro-poor social mobilization programmes and long term capacity building programmes. In India, the project has been under implementation since 1994. The main focus of activity of the SHGs is to generate savings for income generating projects, provide confidence to women, thereby releasing the women from the clutches of money lenders.

In several parts of the country, poor women are being organized in SHGs in large numbers. SHGs are usually informal association of people who join together to improve their lifestyle. One of the most important roles of SHG is to provide opportunities to save and borrow with low rate of interest and availing the benefits of subsidies from Government & other financial institutions.

Data and Methodology:

The objective of the study was to conduct a SWOT analysis of SHGs to identify their strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats. In Jorhat District, up to the year of 2010 March, there were 12607 (DRDA, Jorhat) SHGs that were involved in various income generating programmes promoted under various rural development schemes like Swarna Jayanti Grama Swarozgar Yajana (SGSY), NABARD etc. These SHGs were governed by various NGOs under Block Development. This empirical study was based on fieldwork involving about 100 SHGs and 200 members were selected according to stratified random basis. The area selected is Jorhat District and care has been taken to get adequate representation of belonging to vulnerable groups such as backward classes, SC/ST, widows etc. The samples selected were identified and located through concerted efforts made by the researcher with the help of officials of District Rural Development Agencies (DRDA) and 8 no's Block Development officials, especially the project officer and his team. A purpose specific interview schedule was prepared and administered to 200 group members and 100 SHGs. Field observation methods were used to identify observable physical data. Moreover, group discussions were with women who were involved in activities and group functions were conducted to elicit more details, which could not be obtained from individual members.

Needs and Importance of Self Help Groups:

The UN commission on status of women commented that women constitute half of the world's population, perform two third of the world's work, receives one tenth of its income and own less than hundredth of its property. Women represent three-quarters of heads of households in developing nations, and for every one woman in poverty, there are four dependent children (UNICEF 2001). According to data and statistics report, women are the poorest of the world's poors, representing 70% of the 1.3 billion people who lives in absolute poverty (Data and statistics, 2001). Nearly 900 million women have incomes of less than one dollar par day (UNESCO, 2001). International Labour Organization's analysis of employment trends shows that in spite of progress in some areas, women

generally continue to earn lower incomes, suffer higher unemployment and remain largely restricted to low skilled part-time, informal, and unstable jobs (ILO, 2001).

In India, women are provided certain constitutional rights and protections from inequalities as citizens, however, these statutory rules do not solve issues relating to their socio-economic backwardness. Since the 1950's various governments in India have experimented with a large number of grant and subsidy based poverty alleviation programmes. Studies prove that these mandatory and dedicated subsidized financial programmes implemented with the help of banking institutions have not been successful in meeting social and economic objectives. (www.pria.org/downloaded file/SHGstudy-Kaloghosh.pdf).

In our country, the micro finance initiatives in the private sector can be traced out through the steps taken by Ms. Ela Bhatt for providing banking services to the poor women employed in the unorganized sector in Ahmadabad city of Gujarat state. Shri Mahala SEWA (Self Employed Women's Association) Sahakari Bank was set up in 1974 by registering it as an urban co-operative bank. The bank is providing banking services to the poor self employed women working as hawkers, vendors, domestic servants etc. (www.nabard.org)

"Money is not the most important resources in the struggle against poverty. The poor are also vital resources because they have imagination, guts, knowledge, experience and deep motivation to move out poverty."- (Write James D. Wolfensohn, former World Bank President, in his foreword to Measuring Employment, edited by Deepa Narayanan from Oxford University Press.(Business Line-2006). It is a well –established fact that women, particularly in poor families, are more disciplined, realistic, creditworthy and more concerned about family development than their male counter parts. Hence, micro-credit system through SHGs has focused more attention on the financing for women. (www.pria.org/downloaded file/SHG study-Kaloghosh.pdf).

Mohammad Yunus, the founder and director of grameen Bank, Bangladesh who won the Nobel Prize in 2006 says "We use micro finance and innovative technology of fight global poverty and bring opportunities to the world's poor. With tiny loan and financial services, we help the poor, mostly women ,to start business and escape poverty." (www.grameenfoundation.org). Dr M.K George (2004) conducted "A comparative study of self help groups organized and promoted by NGOs and Kudumbasree, a Government organized NGOs in Kerala, towards empowerment of poor women."The study concludes that both the government and NGO enabled the members' social, economic and political empowerment to a large extent.

Choudhary and Rajakutty (1998) in the book "Fifty years of rural development : Retrospect and Prospect" reveals that the SHG route is one of the cost effective methods of delivery of credit to the poor. Misra Indira (1998) in her book "Financial Accounting system for Self-- Help Groups and NGOs" describes that micro financing and women's self help groups as a medium of micro financing are gaining wide acceptance in the effort to alleviate poverty. S. Subramanian (1998) in his book "Micro credit Delivery Innovations – Self-Help Groups" reveals that self help group concept is a silent revolution taking place in the rural credit delivery that is system in many parts of the world. Rekha R. Gaonkar in her paper on "Role of Self Help groups in empowerment of Women" emphasized that the SHGs were the effective instruments of women empowerment.

Self Help Groups—A Swot analysis:

SWOT Analysis is a method that enables to assess the strengths and weakness of the Self Help Groups and to identify opportunities and possible threats that will be useful for adopting future course of actions. A SWOT analysis can be performed to develop an understanding of the gaps that exist between explicit and implicit visions between day's vision and future vision towards Self Help Groups. The benefits of using SWOT analysis technique is that it provides a structured and a objective means for identifying, differentiating and weighing the strategies strengths and weakness, opportunities and threats that will be more useful for policy makers.

It must be remembered that SWOT factors may vary among SHGs from district to district. Hence, it is important to identify these factors which are specifying to the region through a SWOT analysis. The SWOT analysis can be applied to formulate SHG strategy for regions that exploit the opportunities avoids threats and overcome the weaknesses by effectively employing the strengths.

Strengths:

The SHGs in Jorhat District were found to have a large number of strengths. The groups are found to be homogeneous and cohesive. Majority of the members are in the age group of 30—35 years. They are all motivated by the NGOs and project implementation unit of Block Development offices of DRDA of government of Assam. They are receiving good support from NABARD and other commercial banks. They are also meeting regularly and have been discussing various issues. They have regular saving and are also getting grants, loans from banks and other agencies. Their loan repayment is prompt and the interest charged on a loan is far less than the local money lenders. The loan

amount is used both for consumption as well as production purposes. SHG members pointed out that their association with SHGs helped them to increase their confidence, social awareness and self esteem. They also received many benefits like houses, water harvesting structures, toilets. Majority of the SHG members are attending Grama Sabha meeting regularly and taking part in discussions. In the group meetings, they are able to take important decisions unanimously without interference from external agencies. They are actively involved in social issues. The members are of the view that the attitude of public, family members, officials and elected representatives has changed and get support from all of them.

Weaknesses:

Despite many areas of strengths, the performance of SHG is constrained by several major and interdependent weaknesses. The participation of restitutes is found to be very low. The members of groups have overdependence on the leader and poor leadership qualities of the leader are affecting the performance of some of the SHGs. Members preoccupation in domestic activities is limiting their involvement in SHG activities. The vital weakness is in the management of micro enterprises. The members are not properly trained in the functional areas of micro enterprises. Lack of proper training is affecting the performance of micro-enterprises organized by the SHGs. Their knowledge in product identification, book keeping, marketing strategy etc is very poor. In majority of the micro enterprises, the production is either seasonal or intermittent. The main reasons they pointed out are related to marketing and working capital. It was revealed that the earnings by the members are commensurate with their great effort.

The activities of SHGs are further constrained by lack of awareness about social welfare measures of government and non government agencies. Their lack of experience and low exposure to social and economic activities limit them from handling the commercial activities of micro-enterprises efficiently and effectively.

Opportunities:

There many opportunities for the SHGs. Micro-enterprises can flourish because of vast market and availability of local raw materials. The skill of the local poor can be utilized resource based micro-enterprises, which make use of local raw materials. In addition to that, the SHGs can answer to many social problems like dowry, illicit liquor, illiteracy, female foeticides etc. These SHGs can eliminate the role of local money lenders who were charging high interest and using ruffian practices to get the repayment. The promotion of SHGs is to be seen as an effective step for women empowerment. The efforts of the poor unemployed women can be channelized effectively for their social and economic improvement.

Threats:

Though the SHGs are performing effectively, there is little reason for complacency as there are potential threat factors. It is found that some unapproved agencies are promoting a large number of SHGs. These agencies are cheating and misappropriating the groups' effort. There are potential threats of inter group and intra group conflicts. The services of SHGs were misused by the political parties.

Swot matrix:

The SWOT matrix was identified on the basis of field realities in Jorhat District is as given below:

| Strengths | Weaknesses |
|--|--|
| 1. Groups are homogeneous and cohesive. | 1. Low participation of widows and destitute. |
| 2. Literacy and awareness. | 2. Groups' overdependence on the leader. |
| 3. High percentage of women in the age group of 30-35 years. | 3. Poor qualities of leadership. |
| 4. Motivation through success stories. | 4. Lack of knowledge in book keeping. |
| 5. Participation of members in grama sabha. | 5. Lack of knowledge in product identification. |
| 6. Support from NGOs, Banks, and DRDAs. | 6. Lack of knowledge regarding market and marketing. |
| 7. Interest of members in financial services. | 7. Lack of access of capital. |
| 8. Financial aid and grant and subsidies by agencies. | 8. Lack of assets in their name. |
| 9. High rate of repayment by groups. | 9. Low income, low savings. |
| 10. Regularity in savings. | 10. Pre-occupation in domestic affairs. |

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|--|--|
| 11. High rotation of group funds. | 11. Lack of time after attending family needs. |
| 12. Gradual shift from consumption loan to productive loan. | 12. Low exposure to social and economic activities. |
| 13. Flexibility in group management. | 13. Lack of training opportunity. |
| 14. Decision making by the group, especially in fixing rate of interest and deciding priority of loan. | 14. Lack of knowledge and awareness about various welfare schemes. |
| 15. Active participation in social activities. | 15. Low self esteem by the members. |
| 16. Provide a platform to women to discuss their problems. | 16. Lack of knowledge in legal matters. |

| Opportunity | Threats |
|--|---|
| 1. Potential of self employment through micro enterprises. | 1. Use of SHG services by political parties. |
| 2. Opportunities in agricultures, especially group farming and animal husbandry, poultry. | 2. Existence of too many SHGs promoted by various un approved agencies. |
| 3. Urgent social needs such as fight against dowry, illicit liquor, female literacy, female foeticide etc, | 3. Limited linkage between various organizations involved in promotion of SHGs. |

Conclusion:

The study reveals that the capacity building exercises taken up by the promoting agencies are not adequate to meet the needs of SHGs members. They lack proficiency in soft skills, technical skills and managerial skills. The study suggests that leadership qualities of SHG members need improvement. The SHG members are to be trained in soft skills like leadership traits, team spirit, negotiation risk taking, and assertiveness etc. Intensive training in all functional aspects of business is to be given to the promoters prior to the operationalisation of micro enterprises. It is observed that due to lack of technical skills, quite often, SHGs are promoting micro-enterprises based on traditional skills without any consideration of markets. It can be avoided if technical skills can be given to the promoters for setting up innovative micro-enterprises.

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