



A Brief Note on Strategies of Women Empowerment

CH.ARUNA

Head, DEPT OF ENGLISH, HINDU COLLEGE, GUNTUR

V. BEULAH RANI

LECTURER IN ENGLISH, HINDU COLLEGE, GUNTUR

DR. P. VENU GOPAL

LECTURER IN ECONOMICS, HINDU COLLEGE, GUNTUR

KEYWORDS :

INTRODUCTION

Rural women in the Third World play significant roles in agricultural and rural development. Their activities cover all or some of the production stages, from managerial activities including decision-making to the actual farm work, the preparatory stage, the supporting services at harvest and post harvest activities (Wijaya, 1993).<sup>1</sup> According to Boserup<sup>2</sup> (1970) there were major regional differences in the role that women play in farming in the Third World and that of Africa could be described as the "region of female farming par excellence".

The women in the socio-economic life of Africa and other developing countries have for several decades been neglected by the policy makers and the society at large.<sup>3</sup> All along social scientists have avoided issues concerning women and concentrated on men's activities that were considered worthy of research and women were described in terms of their relationship to those activities (Tshtsinde, 1990).<sup>4</sup> Yet women make up the largest percentage of rural inhabitants mostly due to migrant labour and the breaking down of the social fabric which has left many women leading families alone and being single parents. Reasons advanced for this neglect include. There is limited and under-statement of statistical data on women who work on the household farm. Statistical data on women farmers are likely to be underestimated due to female secretiveness; compared to male farmers, their activities are less susceptible to statistical measurement and systematic observation (Wijaya, 1993).

PROBLEMS AND APPROACHES FOR STRENGTHENING WOMEN ROLES:

Many forces tend to hinder or work against women's agricultural activities. There has been a tendency for all women farmers, whether household heads or not, to lose customary rights of access to land. Legislation has not promoted women's legal ownership and inheritance rights and has at times undermined their rights under customary land tenure systems by registering land in the name of the husband or first son. Another difficulty faced by all women food producers is poor access to official resources. Channels of information, credit, inputs and access to markets have frequently been aimed at men on the implicit assumptions that men are heads of household and that heads of households produce the food crops. External assistance has far more often gone to male farmers than to women (FAO, 1987). The gender composition of extension officers make it difficult for women farmers to obtain extension advice. Most frontline staff are men and so it becomes culturally difficult for them to interact with the increasing number of female farmers. Another problem of much concern is poverty, which is inextricably linked with malnutrition, maternal and child mortality. Figure 1 shows the linkage.

For any strategy to be effective, it should aim to

- i) Bring services physically closer to women;
- ii) Involve them in the formulation and management of programmes affecting them; and
- iii) Make women (individually or in groups) the contact point in order to deliver services directly to the beneficiaries and receivers (Ministry of Agriculture - Ghana, 1990)<sup>13</sup>.

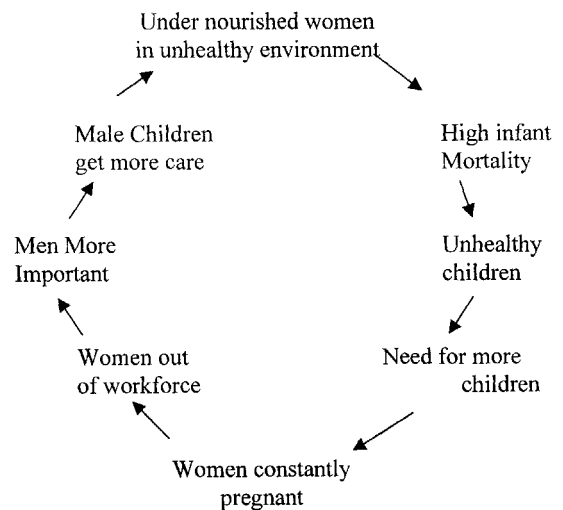


Fig.1. The Vicious cycle of the rural women

Source : Tinker<sup>12</sup>, 1976 : 168

Women need now appropriate technologies for their farming and domestic tasks. On the farm, women need improved small-scale equipment to process food crops. They need much better facilities in work place (FAO, 1987). Technologies that can increase the efficiency or reduce the time spent on some of these activities may help to increase the time spent on other activities like child care and market production (Huffman, 1987).<sup>5</sup> The use of animal drawn carts for fetching fuel in rural areas, planting of quick growing trees, more efficient use of traditional fuel through improved cooking stoves, processing of bush and residue for higher temperatures, and development of more efficient method of charcoal production will reduce the time spent on gathering wood fuel (Tinker, 1976, McDowell & Hazzard, 1976)<sup>6</sup>, as well as saving the environment. Water catchment from roofs has been suggested in areas where precipitation is adequate and suggested the use of inexpensive bamboo gutters as a substitute in areas where roofing sheets are expensive and scarce. Provision of centrally placed hand-dug well could also be of an assistance.

The protection of women as mothers, through expanding access to child care programmes, ranging from ante-and post natal care to child care facilities are also needed. The number of children born at different ages in 2000-2001 shows that the women as mother until 3 5 years of age should be protected with good health. State-wise position of different age groups of women indicated in the table 1.1 shows the number of children ever born to ever-married women. Women until 35 years of age are giving birth and they are to be cared well. Investment in improving the health of women as mothers will pay direct economic dividends to the nation by increasing the capacities of women as producers, as well as those of their children in the long run.

Women farmers need to be included in decision making regarding production activities in which they are involved. This would serve as an incentive to increasing production. Farmers should be treated as farmers irrespective of sex (Tshatsinde, 1990).” Management inadequacy is one of the major constraints confronting the rural women. This may be attributed to the illiteracy of females in the rural areas. Introduction of informal adult education, and increasing the female extension officers and the creation of women’s division in the Agricultural Ministry and Rural Development could help to upgrade women knowledge and hence improve the position of Rural women in Rural society.

### THE WORLD SCENARIO OF EMPOWERMENT:

The last decade had seen significant movement on the world stage with regards to women’s development. The Second Asian and Pacific Ministerial Conference on Women in Development held in Jakarta in 1994 identified several critical areas of concern like the growing precariousness of female poverty, gender discrimination with regard to access to economic resources and decision making, violence against women, denial of women their human rights, etc. The Jakarta Declaration suggested measures to tackle the inequities faced by women in the Asian Pacific region. The International Conference on Population and Development held in Cairo in September 1994 expanded the narrow focus on family planning to the larger, holistic and gender sensitive concept of Reproduction Health as an integral component of general health.

One of the key events on the women’s development map was the Fourth World Conference on Women which was held in Beijing in September 1995: The FWCW came up with a concrete Platform for Action that was to be implemented by the participating governments in the years to come. The PFA exhorted governments, United Nations and Civil society organizations to take strategic action in the following critical areas of concern.

- The persistent and increasing burden of poverty on women
- Inequalities and inadequacies and unequal access to education and training
- Inequalities and inadequacies in and unequal access to health care and related services
- Violence against women
- The effects of armed or other kinds of conflict on women, including those living under foreign occupation
- Inequality in economic structures and policies, in all forms of productive activities and in access to resources
- Inequality between men and women in the sharing of power and decisionmaking at all levels
- Insufficient mechanisms at all levels to promote the advancement of women
- Lack of respect for and inadequate promotion and protection of the human rights of women. Need to make legal and policy changes that would have to be undertaken, ensure elimination of all forms of gender discrimination by 2005.

Developing the country budgets to include provisions for achieving the commitments made at the international level.

- Ratification of CEDAW and the optional protocol to CEDAW.
- Implementation of “Equal Pay for Equal Work”.
- Promotion of a nation wide campaign for elimination of violence against women.

### GLOBALIZATION AND WOMEN :

With the growing globalization and liberalization of the economy as well as increased privatization of services, women as a whole have been left behind and not been able to partake of the fruits of success. So, mainstreaming of women into the new and emerging areas of growth is imperative. This will require training and skill upgradation in emerging trades, encouraging more women to take up vocational training and employment in the boom sector. This will also require women to migrate to cities and metros for work. Provision of safe housing, and other gender friendly facilities at work will need to be provided.

Another facet of globalization is related to the fact that many persons especially women will be severely affected with the advent of setting

up of industrial parks, national highways, SEZ etc., as huge tracts of farm land are likely to be acquired for this purpose. This would require massive resettlement of the displaced persons and their families. It is therefore essential that a viable resettlement policy and strategy is to be formulated and put in place immediately which clearly reflects the needs of women impacted by globalization/ displacement. Then the focus is laid to build the capacity of SHGs realizing the fact that these are in a more advantageous position to combine their resources and talents for enabling viable income generating activities, as compared to a loan.

### WOMEN EMPOWERMENT IN INDIA:

The issues facing women in India have their distinctive features as compared to the rest of the world. A confluence of history, mores and religion have kept the women subjugated by the patriarchal system for Hit: past many centuries. The key issues facing women in India have been described in detail below.

A large proportion of the Indian population continues to live in poverty. Women, especially those from indigenous or minority culture suffer most from this abject poverty. This happens due to added responsibility, apart from the family and household functions, on the women to earn a living and the skewed patriarchal system that denies access to ancestral wealth. Around the world, and more so in India, while women work nearly 67 per cent of working hours they earn only 10 per cent of the income and own less than 1 per cent of the land. Poverty often leads to economic exploitation and sexual abuse of the women. The most debilitating effect it has is in the fact that if the woman is unable to come out of poverty the cycle is perpetuated through her children, especially the girl child.

Another aspect of this feminisation of poverty is the inequality in access to and participation in economic activities as compared to men. Most of the work that women do, especially that at home or in the family fields, is not classified as an economic activity. Gender differences in the work place especially in the nature of work and the compensation continue to be widely prevalent.

Inequitable, access to power and decision making, inequities in the women’s share of decision making in the public domain as well as in their private lives are evident in most societies. It is in this regard that international standards and conventions such as CEDAW, Conventions on the Rights of the Child etc. can be used as a powerful strategy of persuasion of governments. While women have enjoyed the right to vote for many years, they occupy only a small fraction of the seats in the legislature or parliament. In a region which saw the first women head of state, women’s exclusion from most decision making bodies is indeed ironical. The situation is slowly changing with the 73rd and 74th constitutional amendments that have provided for reservation of 33 per cent of the seats in Panchayats and Municipalities for women. This has yet to translate or be reflected at the national and state level.

### STRATEGIES OF EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN:

The incidence of physical, sexual and psychological abuse of women, even in her own home, are increasing day by day. Female foeticide and infanticide are still prevalent in some societies. Another form of abuse is trafficking in women, which is some times across international borders. Women often bear the brunt of riots, conflicts and insurgency. Violence against women, both domestic and societal, is also demonstrating an ever increasing trend. Cases of dowry deaths, rape and sexual molestation are regularly imported in spite of legislation and policies that specifically prohibit the same. Another horrifying violation of human rights that some women have to face at a very early age is being dragged into prostitution. Child Prostitution has increased dramatically over the years. Due to abject poverty, children especially girls, are exposed systematically to sexual abuse for the pleasure and profit of adults. Pornography and child prostitution are all pervasive evils. Parents are prone to sell their girls to agents who take them to brothels and condemn them to a life of squalor and misery. Violence against women needs to be understood, recognised and addressed as a cross cutting issue of support, at individual and community level. This issue needs committed efforts and cannot be an appendage or an automatic offshoot of micro-credit programmes or even the ICDS programmes. While maternal mortality rates have improved over the last fifty years the female illiteracy rates are still alarming. This lack of education denies the women their right to

productive employment as also their legal rights. Illiteracy amongst women is mainly caused by preference to the boys as compared to the girl in matters of education, text books and teaching styles that perpetuate gender type casting, poor infrastructure for the girls (especially those from religious minorities) and a host of other similar reasons. While maternal mortality rates have decreased over the years much remains to be done in order to achieve parity with the development nations on this social indicator. This is mainly due to poor awareness on reproductive rights, poor nutrition, excessive workload and multiple child bearing.

#### CONCLUSIONS:

The programme gave impulse to the formation of Self Help Group concept, Recognizing the merits of this approach, mainly voluntary organizations are implementing self help group concepts in different ways. Homogeneity, in terms of socio-economic status, specific eco-

nom activity and people having almost similar problems and needs were the cohesive factors for this collective approach. Self-Help Group (SHG) is a small group of people (mostly women) who are living in the same area engaged in similar or varied activities, maintaining an almost equal living standards, a political and secular, aiming to achieve a common goal, that is prosperity through thrift and credit. The immediate necessities of joining a group should be felt by the potential members. These common factors can be; a. Financial insecurity or poverty ; b. Social problems ; c. Area specific problems and issues and needs d. Specific problems faced by women folk.

Thus, Self - Help groups are consisting of members from neighbourhood families proved to be an alternative strategy for women empowerment. Same line of formation of SHGs in rural areas and helped to introduce DWCRA programme in Rural Development activities.

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