

# RURAL WOMEN EMPOWERMENT – AN ALTERNATE VISION

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## The Gender Divide:

To live with dignity at all times, is the fundamental right of all human beings – regardless of their legal, social or political status. Social systems that are based on an exploiting mode interact with other systems only to exploit and exclude others from benefits and their resource base (Anita cheria: 2004). Even though women constitute half of any country's human endowment, they are brought up in the culture of silence (Parvin 2005). The World Bank looked at development as a process that ends with freedom from poverty and from other social and economic deprivations. Historically, Indian Women have been isolated from the mainstream economy. They are relegated to the confines of the socio-cultural norms which distended them from the global pool of information and knowledge. This precisely is the reason why women remain disempowered and equity and equality remained a far fetched dream for them.

Nobel laureate Amartya Sen (2001) takes a comprehensive and deeply concerned look at the many faces of gender inequality that is prevalent in many countries. He observes seven types of inequalities the women often suffer from viz. mortality inequality, natality inequality, basic facility inequality, special opportunity inequality, professional inequality, ownership inequality and household inequality. Sen's (ibid) attempt to analyse the gender inequalities has given a peep into the complexity of this phenomenon which seems to have enormous impact that can't be easily comprehended. Over time, he feels, the country can move from one type of gender inequality to harboring other forms of that inequality. For instance the skewed sex-ratio in our country juxtaposes the anti-female attitudes of the society. Even when demographic characteristics do not show much or any anti-female bias, there are ways in which women can have less than a square deal. Therefore focus should be placed on the need to provide a healthy and humane environment, devoid of such milieu which perpetuate gender inequality. The social scientists, NGOs and our planners have to prioritize their efforts to re-appropriate the social environs in favour of women.

## Knowledge for Development:

The present paper is an attempt in this direction by using the concept of '**Information literacy**' as fulcrum to leverate the position of women. To achieve this, the paper envisions the role of Public libraries and their extension services to empower women through enabling the existing government agencies to reach the women at grass root levels. To achieve this goal two basic issues which need immediate assessment and redressal are :

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- (i) **Cultural** : to change the stereo-typical mindset of men folk by making them realize the enormous contribution of women to the society and its economy, and
  - (ii) **Non-cultural** : Access to knowledge for development.

Knowledge is the fundamental resource for all economic and development activities in the society, of which women form an equal part. Any attempt to raise the quality of lives of people, without progress towards the empowerment of women, would be incomplete. The only resource that emancipates women from poverty and empower them is knowledge. There are no worse forms of human rights violation than being deprived of the ability to think and communicate in freedom. Widespread dissemination of knowledge in usable form alone can initiate the change process in women's development.

'**Knowledge for development**' is defined as 'integrating into development programmes, the ability of beneficiaries to access, utilizes and disseminates information and knowledge'. Thus, information and knowledge plays an important role in the development of an individual. Education, information and training can provide economic empowerment by which women can become powerful agents of social change. Reducing poverty places a focus on people's capabilities of avoiding or limiting their deprivation. Key aspects of this are recognizing and developing the potential of the rural poor women, increasing their productive capacity, more importantly, reducing barriers which limit their participation in society and facilitating the realization of socio-economic benefits from their participation.

## Empowerment through Information Literacy

'A set of abilities that require individuals to recognize when information is needed and have the ability to locate, evaluate and use effectively the needed information is known as '**Information Literacy**'. There is a plethora of information due to new and rapid technological innovation. But the information is in

unfiltered form, which is difficult for an individual to understand and evaluate. Hence, there is a need to develop abilities to use information effectively. An information literate individual is able to (i) determine the extent of information needed, (ii) to access the needed information effectively and efficiently (and use it to accomplish a specific purpose), and (iii) evaluate information and its sources critically.

The process of empowerment shall involve the Government agencies such as the Banks, Agricultural Universities and Veterinary Universities, PHCs, APMCs, Dept. of Women & Child Development, Legal Aid cells, Centre for Women's studies etc. The aim is to maximize their utility in carrying out their objectives of rural development. The point is that there is no dearth of policies to address the needs of the marginalized groups, yet it appears, the policies don't percolate down to the people it is meant for.

It is to be noted here that information is not a basic need. An individual is not expected to search for it. Hence, it becomes imperative on the part of the government agencies to "attract" the 'customer' through reaching them at their door step. An appropriate and most effective way of doing this is to take information literacy to the people and make them realize that information is essential to improve the standard of life.

Information literacy efforts will work best when the needs of the community are best identified, rather than imposing the out-of-touch govt. agendas. Thus, in order for information to be more effective, the educators must know the context and the community needs. Information literacy can be more effective, when it is creative, provides contextual learning opportunities and also serves as a model for education itself that teaches the target community how to be independent, critical and active learners. Basic literacy training and life long learning can be considered as good entry points into information literacy. Our aim is to rejuvenate the existing infrastructure with a zeal to reach the masses with a concerted effort to make them literate.

#### **Role of Public Libraries:**

The role of public libraries is pivotal in spreading information literacy. They can play a tremendous role in addition to the existing objective of making a non-literate/non-reader, a potential reader. Public Libraries can bring the government programmes to the rural women through their extension services by projecting the various development programmes with the help of audio-visual media. They could organize colloquia, lectures-cum-demonstrations, show documentaries etc. on wide ranging topics such as on general health, reproductive health and family welfare, immunization, information on animal small husbandry (Cattle breeding, rearing and treatment etc.), water treatment, agricultural management, loan acquisition process, monitoring of grievances, micro enterprise, financial management, account keeping and more importantly on the legal literacy.

- To begin with, the public libraries may start with health information, since illnesses are often a powerful motivation for families to become information literate. The public libraries could be of much help in informing people about their right to health and health related information. The need to have a well equipped PHC therefore is there basic right. Our rural areas are often devoid of such "luxuries". If they have "man" power (sans female gynecologist), they lack adequate medicines and emergency services. Right to life should be enjoyed by all and hence it is imperative to provide information on all aspects of health so as to protect this.

One of the main areas of immediate concern, which has already been mentioned in the preceding lines, is the provision of enabling socio-cultural environments for women folk. Our target should aim at capitalizing both men and women to accomplish the task of empowerment. Hence, the prior most objective of public libraries is to:

- Motivate men to accept women as equals, accept their socio-economic and biological contribution to the society. Erasing the gender gap should be the priority. This should be pursued as an ongoing or continuous process as it can't be achieved in a specified time. The method is to adopt the following technique:

Exposure to culture and communities which do not negate the role of women, where given an opportunity, women could excel in their abilities; can work wonders in changing the mind set of the men to help accept to provide pace for women. It is believed that horizontal level of communication and knowledge networkings have a greater impact on the horizontal flow of information. Since gender inequality starts early in life, the attitudes towards girl-children could be altered through portrayal of the images of girls excelling in different fields and thus creating a positive image for her. Therefore, public libraries could change the stereotypical mindset and help women reap the benefits of development process by bringing them to the main stream.

- Public libraries could improve the community living by providing them the knowledge about the main functions of the various government programmes and policies, the rules and regulations involves therein, the agencies which have been established with an objective of rural development, are also expected to be sensitive to the rural life schedule. It is appropriate on the part of public libraries to hold the congregations at the hours of leisure – may be in the evening or in the nights. For that, the public libraries have to become more flexible in their working schedule so as to adjust to the rural demands. Further, the following points should be borne in mind:

- All programs have to be conducted in vernacular. It is highly appropriate to involve demonstration with lectures and discussions during the disseminations of information, wherever applicable.
- Experts from the respective fields should be invited to discuss the various issues depending upon the needs of the people, in the areas such as, cattle rearing, breeding, illness etc; information on new methods of cultivation, seeds, fertilizers, etc., could be disseminated with the help of Dept. of Agriculture, Animal husbandry. If the community is economically developed, we can then expect some influence on the women folk too. Hence the need to address the men and women equally.
- Issues concerning womenfolk are plenty, keeping the cultural sensitivity of the population, it is appropriate to organize all women meetings to address the topics such as reproductive health, domestic violence, harassments etc. so as to have an uninhibited discussion without influence of the 'Patriarchs'. Women this way will feel comfortable in airing their grievances. As far as men are concerned, they could be sensitized and 'tackled' in all men meeting. It is very important to extend the information on various govt./non-govt. Agencies/help lines/legal aid cells which could be accessed in the times of need.
- In order to achieve this, public libraries can also make use of the Radio, which is well recognized as the cheapest and the most effective way to reach millions of women who are remote. Information literacy makes an individual informed about hitherto unknown aspects which directly concern their lives. Through this process, the so called 'Public Service' sector becomes more responsible in meeting the demands of the public. Once the public is made information literate and is also made aware of the centers where they can seek information from, there is bound to be pressure on the agencies to perform more responsibly.
- Marginalization of women's work is often due to lack of information and their lack of participation in governance. The Center for Women's Studies have a special objective to empower women. They could play an important role in spreading the information literacy among the womenfolk. With the help of such activities as group discussion, colloquia, audio visual aids, expert lectures, they can educate and equip them with various empowering tools so as to fight atrocities, negation, violence, discrimination and, bring them out of the shackles of invisibilities. Their capacities of governance could be enhanced through exposure to appropriate interventions, such as exposing to them the images of other women governing different areas.
- Literacy in the realm of economy, education, health, finance, enterprise, agriculture, marketing, banking etc will surely enhance their socio-economic status, but information literacy in the area of human rights will help them attain the self-esteem which every individual has the right to protect. Be it at domestic front or at the public domain. The violation of basic human rights is an order of the day. The inequity and inequality deprive an individual of her/his self confidence, any where. Atrocities on women continue through out their lives, especially at domestic front. The men unfortunately never feel the guilt as it has been the common sight of his growing up years and is considered 'normal'. Through exposure and awareness, this 'imbalance' between the genders could be minimized.
- Majority of the women are not aware of their legal rights and hence can't benefit from the laws. They undergo untold misery of discriminations in all kinship positions, through this knowledge; they could be able to acquire the space of their own in the social system. This enabling process can make them aware of their 'rights' as well (As they have been socialized throughout their lives only about their duties').
- The success of any programme aimed at development depends upon the availability of monetary resources. Illiteracy plays often havoc to the dignified living of an individual in the present days fast developing society. Their inability to read and write reflects in their lack of confidence and leads to 'voicelessness' against any type of atrocities and denials. The government's allocation of funds for the various rural development programmes are appreciable. But the very people it is meant for are unable to reap the benefits. The 'divide' between the 'haves' and 'have nots' gets ever increasing, due to the pathological ills of our society. It is pertinent, to provide the knowledge related to various funding agencies, such as Banks, their style of functioning, the rules and regulations and procedure to apply for the same. While doing so, it is also essential to provide information on the lurking 'pathogens' in the garb of 'helpers' (read 'middlemen'), so as to fully reap the benefits of the loans, subsidies, and other such facilities available. Public libraries can arrange colloquia, demonstrate the nuances of the procedures in Banking, thus help them achieve their due share and fight against any wrongs in their way of development.
- Often a meager financial assistance in the name of 'pension' for old age and handicap persons, fails to reach the needies, just for want of information and the cumbersome procedure involve there in such as birth Certificates, income Certificates, proof of handicap etc. There should be an enabling environment to reduce their haplessness; sick women, old women, unlettered women, penny less women, are often clueless about such policies or don't have knowledge as to where to go and ask for help to access these information. The Centre for Women's studies can work towards this objective in an efficient manner. Because of their ignorance; the women often become pawns in the hands of 'middle men' and victims of red tapism.
- Women in rural areas are often equipped with the knowledge of some handicrafts, if not they could be provided with skill training through the Department of Women and Child Development.

Empirical studies have shown that the success of any economically viable activity depends on the training, local availability of raw material and local marketing avenues in addition to the capital. If any one of the aspects is missing, then the programme is sure to fail. Often we subsume that providing capital is an end in itself or training is provided in such skills that the products do not have local demand; such blind implementations fail to fetch the desired results. It is therefore, important, the people themselves are enabled to identify their needs, extent of information require and access the information effectively and are also able to evaluate information and its sources critically. To achieve the above objective is to provide information literacy in these areas. The APMCs should be wrapped in to do the task

#### **Conclusion:**

One of the major concerns in the field of education, since Indian Independence has been the provision of educational opportunities to women. But, gender disparity still persists with uncompromising tenacity, especially in rural areas. As a result, women account for an overwhelming percentage of total number of illiterates therefore, through information literacy efforts should be made to make women realize that information is power, and education and access to information is a pre-requisite for fighting against oppressions. Through various information agencies we can create an environment where women would demand information and knowledge that would empower them and inculcate in them the confidence that change is possible, if they work towards achieving knowledge.

If women have to achieve their rightful place in the social-economic and political system of the country, it is necessary that all women have access to the world's gigantic and ever growing information base. Information Literacy is one of the tools by which we can develop the abilities of the rural poor women, so as to make informed choices in the matters that affect them. With the help of appropriate and effective Information & Communication Technologies (ICTs), we can make the rural poor more informed, self-reliant and enhance their self-esteem. Knowledge is power. By providing the skill to develop the ability to determine the extent of information needed and use effectively the needed information, we can lead them to the gates of re-discovering their inner capabilities.

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