

By Invitation

Women Workers: Addressing Constraints to Work

Ratna M. Sudarshan

Introduction

This paper examines the experience with one particular government program seeking women's economic empowerment, and is based on field work mostly conducted for evaluative studies of the program. It argues that prevalent social norms translate into patterns of time use that can be difficult to shift, and that continues to mediate outcomes around women's work. The paper suggests that outcomes may improve if more attention is given to building capacity of implementing agencies on gender equality concerns and that the creation of 'communities of practice' that are able to displace or re-orient 'communities of birth' offers a way to change gendered social norms, which is essential for successful empowerment outcomes.

Participation in paid work outside the home is critical to the survival for most households. However, women's work participation in India as measured in official data is much lower than that of men, and there has been no significant reduction in the gender gaps in work participation over the last few decades. Activists and researchers have pointed out that this data does not fully capture women's work and economic contribution because much of it is 'invisible' being unpaid, hidden within the home, and mixed into care work. The level and nature of women's work force participation is partly influenced by individual attributes (in particular education and skills); and partly by the need to manage care demands of the household, and cultural and social expectations on women's time. Consequently opportunities for work in the market place are mediated by various institutions including the family and household. Against this background, there is a long history of engagement by the state and non state actors in India to find ways of strengthening women's bargaining power in order to improve the quality of their work participation.

Ratna M. Sudarshan is Advisor & former Director, Institute of Social Studies Trust, New Delhi. E-mail: ratna.sudarshan@gmail.com

Women's workforce participation rate as measured by the National Sample Survey Organisation is considerably below that of men, and is higher in rural than urban areas. In 2009-10, 81 % of women (and 24 % of men) were reported as economically inactive; female work participation was 36.8 % in rural and 18.3 % in urban areas (against 81.2 % and 73.9 % for men) (Chen & Raveendran 2012). A time use survey carried out in six states by the Central Statistical Organisation in 1998-99 had estimated the weekly average time spent by men on SNA activities as 42 hours compared to 19 hours for women; while for extended SNA activities (including household and care related activities) men spent around 3.6 hours compared to 34.6 hours for women. The accuracy in measurement of women's work can be contested, but the numbers serve to illustrate differences in gender roles as well as perceptions as women often do not view their economic contribution as 'work' (on the measurement debate see for example Jain, 1985; SARH & SCOPE, 1996; Jhabvala & Datta, 2012)

Government schemes designed to support women's work and enable empowerment through work, are one example of initiatives taken by a democratic state committed to equality and citizenship. Bringing about 'equality' between men and women is a part of the larger project of making the transition from a hierarchical to a democratic society, and is enshrined in the Constitution. In the words of Andre Beteille, "The Indian Constitution ...is not merely a set of rules relating to governance, but a design for

a new kind of society. The older society that had prevailed for centuries and millenia was based on the principle of hierarchy; the new society envisaged in the constitution was to be based on the principle of equality....."(Beteille, 2000: 267)

A review of Plan documents shows that it is in the late seventies/ early eighties that an accelerated effort to mobilize women as workers became much more evident in government programs. This is also the period that significant non government efforts at mobilizing and organizing women workers began to increase in scale. It is also around this time that policies directed at opening up the economy and favoring globalization began to be formulated. It is likely that these reinforced one another. This paper looks at the actual experience with one particular program to argue that prevalent social norms continue to mediate outcomes around women's work and could be more clearly factored into policy making.

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Empowerment through Work

The appointment by the Government of India of the Commission on Self Employed Women and Women in the Informal Sector, and the publication of its report, *Shramshakti*, in 1988, can be seen as the start of a new direction in the plan-

ning for women's economic empowerment. *Shramshakti* pulled together data on women's work, its nature and characteristics, and recommended a supportive policy framework. It drew attention to the fact that 94% of women workers were in the informal sector¹ and to the need to find ways of bringing them into the mainstream of economic activity and organising effort. *Shramshakti* chose to emphasize the economic aspects of women's situation, leaving implicit the underlying social realities and the linkage between social and economic factors.

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Government programs can influence women's work participation either directly or indirectly. An improvement in the social and economic infrastructure or in the levels of education and skill and in the overall rate of growth will indirectly influence the level and manner of women's work force participation by changing the environment within which work-related decisions are taken. Programs that directly support women's work do this usually in one of two ways, either by ensuring women's inclusion in general employment generating programmes by specifying a quota or reservation (usually one third of beneficiaries), or through specific

programmes that target women workers. For example one third of the beneficiaries of major poverty alleviation programs (such as IRDP, TRYSEM and NREP²) are expected to be women. The percentage share of women in IRDP and TRYSEM which are self employment programs shows a steady increase in the share of women beneficiaries to all beneficiaries, from 11.5 % in 1985-86, to 34.16 % in 1995-96 and 57.59 % in 2005-06. Similarly there has been an increase in the share of women in other employment generating programmes and taking four wage employment programs together (NREP, RLEGP, JRY, EAS)³ the share went up from 9.7% in 1985-86 to 25.7% in 2005-06 (CSO, 2010: 65). This does suggest that with a policy of reservation, women get drawn into programs even if their initial access is low. The share of women in the flagship MGNREGA program was 40.9 % in 2006-07 and 47.9 % in 2008-09 (*ibid*: 68). Among the women specific programs are STEP and NORAD; other schemes which include skill training and the organisation of women into groups for marketing and credit have been introduced, as in the *Swa Shakti* Programme and the setting up of the *Rashtriya Mahila Kosh* (Seth, 2001: 189-231 for a useful review of official approaches to women's economic empowerment).

¹ A term replaced today by 'informal economy' to note the fact that informal employment is present in both organised and unorganised enterprises.

² Integrated Rural Development Program, Training of Rural Youth for Self Employment, National Rural Employment Programme

³ Rural Landless Employment Guarantee Programme, Jawahar Rozgar Yojana, Employment Assurance Scheme

Self Help Groups

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All the programs for women's economic empowerment in India also support the organising of women into groups – in the case of government programs, while earlier programs more usually spoke of women's co-operatives, today the focus is on 'self help groups' (SHGs) and all government programs channel financial support through women SHGs. The 'self help group' idea and method of organising is a product of the 1990's.⁴ It is interesting to note that even though the Constitution created a framework within which rights and entitlements are bestowed upon *individuals*, the formation of groups is not difficult in this society. Perhaps the explanation lies in history, as captured by Andre Beteille (2000:182): "Not only the constitutional state but citizenship as well is a novelty in India's long historical existence. ...We will not appreciate the significance of citizenship as a social, historical and jural category if we fail to recognise its novelty. Traditional Indian society was a society of castes and communities, and not a society of citizens.The subordination of

the individual to the group was a feature of most, if not all, pre-modern societies. The individual as an autonomous legal and moral agent entitled to respect and responsibility in his own right, is not the starting point of social evolution, but the end-product of a long historical process. That process faces many obstacles in India where the loyalties due to caste and community are not only very strong but often reinforced by the democratic process itself. The rights of citizenship can be respected only in a society in which the autonomy of the individual is valued."

The motivation behind formation of co-operatives or SHGs might be purely practical, such as allowing group collateral for individual loans; however the creation through these or other group formations of 'communities of practice' could be an effective way of countering where necessary, the influence of 'communities of birth'.

Programs seeking to empower women through work have thus also been closely associated with the growth of small women's groups of various kinds, whether subsequently federated or absorbed in larger groupings, or not. The creation of women's groups in order to access public funds is one aspect of such organising. In addition, organising women around work and related concerns has been the effort of many independent agencies including importantly the Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA) and the Working Women's Forum (WWF), and many others. At times, the two efforts overlap, and groups cre-

⁴ Perhaps a link exists here with globalisation, renewed stress on encouraging enterprise in the market economy, and the need to find ways of reaching out to the 'bottom end' entrepreneur.

ated and facilitated by NGOs or trade unions are able to access government funds. However, there are also significant differences between the two sets, turning around their ability to enable the emergence of 'transformational leadership'.⁵ As *Shramshakti* had pointed out and as is likely true today as well, 'spontaneous organising' of women in the informal economy rarely occurs.

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Training for Employment

STEP (Support for Training and Employment Programme) is focussed on women only, is an older program targeting women in selected sectors and seeking to enhance skills and enable asset creation. As originally formulated, women's co-operatives were seen as a mechanism for the implementation of the program although today these have largely been displaced by SHGs. The program was started in the mid-eighties during the Seventh Plan period, by the then Department (now Ministry) of Women and Child Development, as a centrally sponsored program. It emphasized the critical need to increase and improve employment opportunities for women. Women's involvement in economic activities was seen as a necessary pre-condition to build up their self-reli-

ance and the design of the program was influenced by advocacy of the women's movement and in particular by the discourse on informal work.

The objective of STEP program is to provide support for training and other inputs with a view to creating sustainable self employment for women in selected sectors in which a large number of women were already present; the endeavor was to enable a critical mass of women to begin to play a more decisive role in these sectors. For this reason STEP grants have been large grants expected to cover a large number of beneficiaries and hence make a difference not just to the individual's income earning ability but also to the contribution of women in that sector. A review of annual budget allocations over the first twenty years of the program, 1986-2006, shows that overall roughly 9 percent of the total budget for women's welfare has been allocated to STEP. The relative size of the program has fluctuated, reaching a peak of 20 percent in 1993-94, and 15 percent in 2002-03, and a low of 1.8 percent in 1989-90.

The assumptions of the program can thus be stated as:

- Providing a package of assistance will allow women to earn more, lead to economic empowerment as well as an overall empowerment.
- Gender sensitization of the relevant institutions in the sectors selected will lead to gender mainstreaming in those sectors (i.e. increase women's presence and decision-making roles).

⁵ It has been argued by us elsewhere that women's groups that have evolved organically show greater capacity to generate leadership when compared to officially constituted groups. See ISST (2005).

Eight traditional sectors of employment namely agriculture, small animal husbandry, dairying, fisheries, handlooms, handicrafts, *khadi* and village industries, sericulture were selected for the program. Later, two more sectors, social forestry and waste land development, were added. These sectors were identified as being 'sheds' where women were found working in large numbers and in the informal sector. Despite their numbers, the 'value added' activities or operations were traditionally done by men. Additionally these were sectors where the infrastructure existed to mainstream the employment of women (having received large investments in each of the Plans and having extensive infrastructure in the public sector, with R & D supported extension services both at the Centre and State levels).

The program offered support for training and upgradation of skills in the existing areas of activity, along with providing linkages for marketing of products and a range of support services intended to help in empowering women. Thus, work was an entry point and a holistic intervention was intended. A range of strategies were to be used including mobilizing women in small viable groups and encouraging self employment.

The success of the program was to be assessed by seeing what difference had been made to income earned. Other criteria were suggested initially, including numbers of women and per capita earnings of women workers in the sector, but ultimately it was felt that the key criterion would be the level of earnings of the direct program beneficiaries and the change observed in this.

Initially, the STEP program had expected that the grants would be made to public sector organizations already in existence in these sectors. These could include boards, federations, universities, home science colleges, semi-government agencies, central social welfare board, state social welfare boards, DRDAs,⁶ district women development agencies, and so forth. This is because it was expected that, in the light of the large size of grant, official and semi official agencies would be able to manage the money as well as follow accepted financial norms and procedures; and that there would be less demand for creation of facilities and instead greater emphasis on utilizing available facilities more fully. Other organizations, such as *mahila mandals*, registered voluntary organizations, public trusts, co-operative societies, charitable companies, local bodies, *Panchayati Raj* Institutions, etc., were expected to be involved in the selection of the target group of beneficiaries, delivery of package of other supportive services by the implementing agencies, and gender sensitization of all those involved in the project.

Challenges of Implementation

Based on fieldwork conducted in the course of a series of evaluations of the program, some facts about the constraints faced by women become clearer. First, that women's work engages the household and is not an autonomous, individual decision; second, that women seeking to take on new or additional

⁶ District Rural Development Agency

work related responsibilities need continuous counseling and support which in turn calls for sensitive and committed implementing agencies; and third, that the formation of groups even if for a narrow purpose can, in the best outcome, lead to wider impacts on women's public roles.

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First, the field observations confirm in many ways there exist close links between women's work and household practices. STEP is designed as a woman specific program. All its beneficiaries are therefore women. STEP seeks to include the poorest women as its beneficiaries, but this did not always happen, mainly because of the risks associated with self employment and the difficulty of advancing credit without any collateral. Those women who did participate, and who were able to take up self employment in the activity in which they received training, earned varying amounts of additional income.

Obviously, an increase in women's earning will also benefit the household, but in order for women to increase their time and other commitments to any income earning activity, some changes in roles within the homes will need to be accepted by others in the family too. The fact that the family needs to support the participation of women has interesting implications.

Men continue to play a role in this woman specific program. In one area it was seen during field visits that men manage payments, records as well as milk delivery. This kind of participation by men was needed because of work within the household – "it is normal for me to deliver milk as she has so much work at home"; it is needed in interacting with the rest of the world - feeling safer while traveling to the centre, talking to men from the dairy unions. Thus, the insistence of the program that women should hold the key (and paid) positions of Secretary and Treasurer was intended to give them greater control and is adhered to on paper, but in actuality men continue to control several decisions.

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In one place, it was seen that men shared the work, but not those activities which did not have immediate economic outcomes. Thus men did help with buying cattle, fodder, pouring milk, going to the vet, collecting money, attending meetings....but rarely or never with activities like giving water to the animals, bathing animals, cleaning the shed, and so on. In another example, it was seen that only 4 % of those women who had received training were actually putting their training to use in commercial cultivation of medicinal and aromatic plants. Possibly, the fact that land use decisions are usually taken by men, who had not been directly engaged in the program, was a reason for this.

Recognising that men continue to be associated with women's activities so that they continue to take strategic decisions that the program intended should be taken by women, has at times led to the recommendation or approach that men should be removed from all official positions. That is, it has become necessary to insist that women must be seen to exercise their position and show autonomy in taking decisions. But such an approach can lead to backlash within households.

Overall, the field research suggests that providing women with a source of income earning - additional to what they were getting earlier - does not easily translate into any real change in gender relations within the home.

Second, the role of the intervening implementing agencies in helping to shape women's sense of self is extremely important. Recognizing that 'empowerment' means more than economic benefit, the program has a holistic conception – literacy and general awareness to go hand in hand with economic aspects – but these aspects of training and program intervention are not sustained. It was seen that only the minimal training required for the program was usually provided. In addition, while technical training relating to animal care and veterinary services are usually provided at least to the office bearers, this is not true of the legal literacy, awareness, nutrition etc that was supposed to be a part of the services offered. The lack of enthusiasm or appreciation for these complementary trainings are a reminder that the institutions through which the women's

empowerment programs are being managed themselves may have little appreciation of the various nuances of gender inequalities. The program cannot achieve more than is desired by them, and what they understand as the objectives of the program.

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One comment that came up repeatedly in field findings is that of 'insufficient motivation' on the part of the women. This presumably suggests that giving information and training is in itself not enough to change the behavior and that continuous hand holding is needed. This kind of role is difficult to build into time-bound programs but is essential if the desired outcomes are to be achieved.

Third, the creation of collectives did not always lead to the emergence of a group voice, since the efforts put into organizing were of varying intensity. As in any program implemented over as large an area as India, there are examples of success and instances of failure. Successes beyond that of achieving higher income included organizing women into groups that led to their gradual participation in other public or community forums and to an entry into the public sphere, such as active participation in the local *gram panchayat*.

Even if we see the primary purpose of the STEP program as being the tangible and measurable outcome of additional income, these findings confirm that motivating women to take on new activities and new roles has implications for the household. The positive economic changes are unlikely to be sustained if men oppose these new roles. The ability of women's groups to encourage and enable the emergence of voice is stronger when there is a continued presence or facilitation by the agency that initiated the formation of these groups.

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Assumptions underlying the anticipated 'theory of change' include that if women are enabled to access additional opportunities for paid work, this will mean additional income for the household. However, it was observed with some of the STEP projects that women have to spend very many hours in earning a meager additional income so that if women's time is to be valued the net benefit is extremely marginal. It is further assumed that this additional income will actually accrue to the woman and that she has some control over how it is spent. In the usual situation, this is very dependent on the household and the manner in which relationships within the household mediate the spending of the income earned. Our fieldwork suggests that women generally seek cooperative rather than conflictual solutions.

Sum Up

More attention needs to be given to building capacity of the intermediate implementing agencies.

In closing, looking at these observations from the fieldwork, two broad conclusions can be drawn. The first is that in implementing gender equality programs which seek to bring in new priorities from traditional customary practice, more attention needs to be given to building capacity of the intermediate implementing agencies. Clearly the central government and its officials cannot manage and implement programs across the country and its millions of villages. It thus transfers the responsibility for implementation to a range of implementing organizations. We need to understand more clearly the motivations and the characteristics of these institutions and the extent to which they can actively lead an equality agenda.

Second, while it continues to be appealing to attempt change from the top - essentially using the framework of law and constitutional rights - to bring about change in the social situation of women, the reality on the ground suggests that the actual observable impact is far less than expected or intended, because the strength of existing social norms or values is very strong. Without diluting the commitment to change, a different process that seeks to build upwards is needed. The creation of 'communities of practice' that are able to displace or re-orient 'communities of birth' is likely a slow process, but offers a sustainable way forward.

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