

Ashit N. CHANDARIA

Women's Empowerment Through Group Economic and Educative Activities

The following examples emphasize the strength of women's educational programmes with group-initiated social and economic activities, to reshape their lives and the communities around them.

It proves that when women get a chance to come to forefront of community life, the hidden potential of this more-than-half of the population is better utilized and as a result, the entire community benefits from it.

Four Examples

Two women drop the idea of female feticide after attending a training-cum-educative classes organized by a non-governmental organisation (NGO), Shri Vikas Trust in Rajkot, Gujarat, India.

A woman starts earning Rs. 5000 (110 USD approximately) a month after getting preliminary training in sewing.

Women of a village in the Okhamandal region of Gujarat organize themselves into groups to fight local problems and also to get a better road constructed. The groups of women were formed and trained by an NGO in Okha.

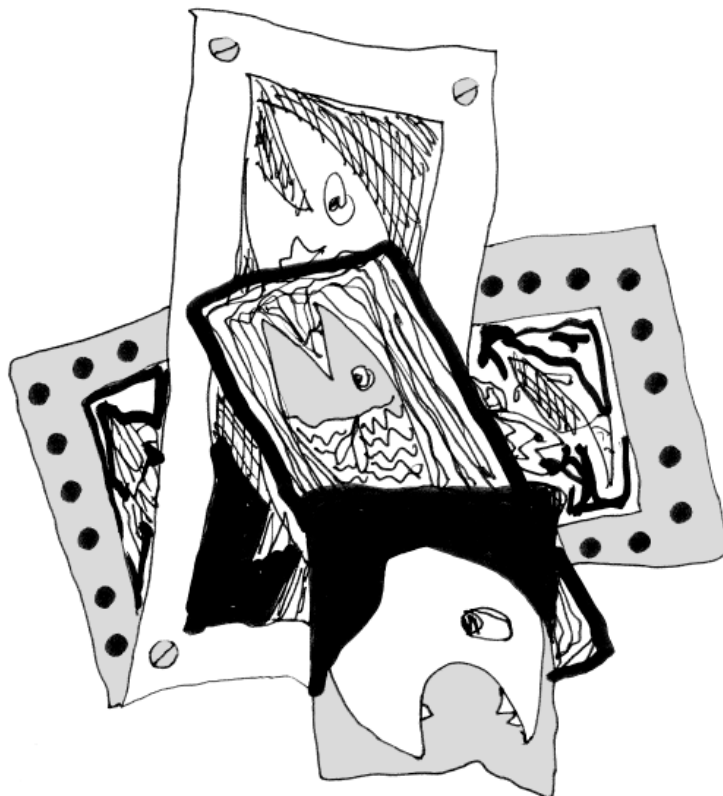
Women from Gariya Village in Gujarat, who had never been allowed to go out of their houses, started going out to nearby towns to engage in trade activities after forming groups and undergoing training provided by another NGO, Mahila Vikas Sewa Mandal.

Women's Education

Women's education is an ongoing process of learning and empowerment that transcends the mere quest to become literate. Education can provide a basic knowledge of fundamental rights available to women, and how to deploy these rights in order to curb exploitation with regard to social evils.

Women's contribution to the GDP (Gross Domestic Product) of their respective countries through various sectors is also a significant determinant of any given nation's

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social progress. Women contribute to economic activities, for example, in the following ways:

Trade, business and service activities; household maintenance; care for children, sick, elderly and disabled in their own households; community services and help to other households; social and cultural activities; personal care and self-maintenance.¹

Such contributions can be enhanced by providing education and training. There are large numbers of women in India, as in many underdeveloped countries and developing countries, who have either never gone to school or discontinued after a very short time.

Skill Based Education (SBE)

Such undereducated women actually need a skill-based education (SBE), and not just primary education, that will help them to perform in special sectors—for example in handicrafts and ceramics.

Hand-woven textiles and handicrafts are immensely popular in international markets. If these women mobilize to work for this sector, they can gain economic independence; and education will provide them the basic platform for this.

Thus, looking at the strategic role played by women on various fronts—social, economic, cultural and political—women's education inevitably requires that it be given due emphasis.

Many governmental organizations and institutions are active in the field of women's education. But NGOs too play a very important role in many parts of the world in the development and empowerment of women.

In fact, in many cases these NGOs are far better equipped and skilled to carry out work in areas which governmental bodies have not yet reached or are not able to do proper work. In order to understand activities related to women's education, it is vital to study the contributions made by various NGOs in this field and how they met with success.

Gujarat Earthquake

Through field visits across Gujarat in India, the author had the opportunity to study 18 NGOs which were working for women's empowerment through education-cum-self employment training under the government of Gujarat's programme, intended to restore the livelihood of women in places affected by the 2001 earthquake there.

Some of these NGOs had been working very efficiently and had filled with fervent hope and vigour many women and men in the earthquake-devastated areas. All the NGOs were working independently from each other but were required to follow certain basic guidelines issued by the government of Gujarat and the donor agencies.

This article is about those NGOs, which carried out very good work for the women (and also men) beneficiaries in adverse conditions with a very limited budget. The method followed by these NGOs can be followed by any NGOs, or even governmental organisations, across the world in the implementation of any grass roots-level development programme.

The author observed that even when the NGOs have good intentions and programmes, most of them faced such problems as resistance from men in villages. Other problems

1 RAJESH Bhatia, *Measuring Gender Disparity Using Time Use Statistics*. Economist and Political Weekly, August 17, 2002.

included the initial reluctance of women to join the programme; and after that, the quality of the education, the lack of sustained motivation, time constraints, orthodox cultural and social norms and stereotypical views on the role of women.

But some NGOs came out with novel ideas and strategies to get past such problems. Following are some strategies adopted by these NGOs for women's empowerment through group economic and educative activities.

Focal Points

The NGOs started working with one, two or three people in the rural areas, and got them involved in some of the NGOs' running projects. Gradually, that person or those people became aware that the NGOs were doing good work and they asked the NGOs to start similar programmes in their own villages and regions as well.

So the NGOs got a starting point, which could also be called a *focal point*. The interaction with the focal person or people gave the NGOs vital inputs regarding the implementation of the programme.

These inputs included the type of activities that a certain section of the village would be capable or incapable of doing, or which exact time is suitable, proper and apt to start the programme, and so on.

Activities

In almost all villages that the author visited, there were more than three castes. Women of a certain caste were only able to do animal husbandry work, while some were experts in handicrafts or embroidery.

Consequently, the NGOs had to be very careful in selecting the beneficiaries, as well as the activities for which it was going to give training to the beneficiaries. Having more and more local people working for the NGOs induced other women (and men) of the village or even of the region likewise to join the programme.

The NGOs trained women especially in the following activities: sewing, animal husbandry, handicraft making, toy making, retail trade, and other similar ones. Initially, most people did not perceive any value in the education or training; they could see no reason why it should be necessary. The villagers were so naive that they never thought such training or education could be helpful to them in improving their lives.

Education Through Economy

So, it was very necessary that people could see concrete rewards from the programme. But economic gains alone were not enough to significantly improve the women's condition, so *economic activity was kept at the core of the programme, around which education was wrapped*.

Successfully merging education with several kinds of economic activities and group building helped to attract more and more women to join the programme and continue to stay with it.

Once the women started to attend the training classes regularly, educative lectures replaced training sessions occasionally, and then the lectures were made every day after the training sessions, for one hour or so.

So the education part 'crept' into the programme, as the NGOs felt that if the educative classes were started full-scale from the beginning itself, many women would not have ever joined, thinking that education was not at all important for them.

The subjects for the educative classes were decided beforehand with the objective of making the women aware of their rights and duties, and also using groups as their main collective decision-making power.

So the NGOs ensured that along with substantial economic independence, the participating women also were enlightened about their rights, as well as about their duties. It was from many such education classes that more and more women became aware of the follies of aborting girl-children and dropped the idea of aborting their own girl-child.

Initial Phases

Since religion is usually the centre of most social gatherings in the villages, some NGOs used religious activities like *bhajans* as platforms for their first meetings. If the villages had two or three major communities, the NGO preferred to have separate groups, in order to avoid any type of conflict between the two groups.

In their second meeting, in order to implant the idea of developing and utilizing their handicrafts and other skills, a longer demonstration of the gains earned by women of other villages was given.

Some NGOs simply did public gatherings at the centre of the village and asked women to join the programme. At the beginning of the programme, the NGOs explained that the women would be given training in some or the other activities in which the women already had some basic skills.

For example, those who had many generations of expertise in embroidery were to be given training in making merchandise for themselves that would be acceptable to clients of several international markets.

Those, who were good, let us say, at animal husbandry, were given loans to buy cows or buffalo or other proper animals, and they were given training to sell milk quickly and earn more money.

The NGOs said it was highly advisable to have women workers and instructions in the initial phase. Having women workers also helped the NGOs get over the reluctance of other women in the village to join the programme.

Feedback and Results

Seeing that the women were really learning something worthwhile, something that would help to raise the income of their family, men's resistance against the programme, too, diminished gradually.

In fact, in some villages those men who were initially opposed to such training-cum-education programmes are now even asking the NGO to start similar programmes for the men of the villages. Some of the NGOs were highly successful in making the women of villages better understand the concept of collective savings and even of banking activities.

They helped the women form co-operative groups under which all the women saved a fixed amount of money every week. The money was deposited in a fund; the fund was then used to advance any loan to needy co-operative member at a nominal rate.

Rotating the Trade Cycle

The Gujarat government and the donor agencies wanted to restore the livelihood of the women; thus the work of the NGOs did not end with the formal end of training. Once the women started making goods and also selling them, they were taught to buy new raw materials from the proceeds of the sale and were advised to use profits only for personal use or family use.

So, they were groomed to be self-reliant in carrying the trade; thus when one cycle of raw material-to-finished goods was over and finished goods sold away, the women need not go back to the NGOs to ask for more aid or help.

They had learned to plough the money back into business, and then to continue rotating the trade cycle, while using the profits earned in each cycle for their family or for their personal expenses.

Handover Period

Thus women continued to become empowered. The NGOs had a mechanism (by way of regular visits by the NGO workers to the beneficiaries) for checking if the women were continuing the economic activities or not. Also, in some cases problems at domestic and/or village level that they were facing were discovered and sorted out.

The day-to-day working of the group of women was then handed over to a group leader, who was pragmatic, interactive and open to communicate with other group leaders at intra- and inter-village levels, at regular intervals, so that they could gain from each other's experiences.

Thus, when the group leaders slowly became capable enough to take care of the whole group, the NGOs gradually withdrew themselves from the day-to-day work. The NGOs were careful enough to give particular skills to limited number of women in each village, so as to avoid a situation where every other woman in the village made handicrafts or stitching clothes and cannibalized each others' customers.

Though most of the women in the various villages were trained to sell their own merchandise, some NGOs also displayed the goods made by their beneficiaries at various trade fairs across India. Thus they gave more exposure to the work done by the beneficiaries. The benefits of such good strategy and work were seen clearly while I interacted with the women beneficiaries of these NGOs.

Fascinating Achievements

Some of the great successes of this programme have already been mentioned at the beginning of the article. But it would be worthwhile to mention some more such fascinating achievements.

A woman who was partly handicapped was dependent on her old father and mother for support. She was considering committing suicide, but after coming into this programme she stopped thinking of ending her life.

Furthermore, she started earning well enough to support both her mother and her father. She was given training by the NGO called the Shri Vikas Trust of Rajkot.

Another woman had five children and she had also lost her husband. She was considering giving away her children to an orphanage because she was not able to support all five of them.

But after she got training in making and selling handicrafts, she started earning enough to support her children, and she was also happy that her children were with her and not in an orphanage.

In one area of Okhamandal, there were more than a dozen different castes, and not all of them always looked each other in the eye. But then an NGO started its programme and other programmes in that place.

The result was that the women and men of that particular place understood the power of being united and intercaste conflicts gradually started to decline. These women then joined hands to further demand better infrastructure from the politicians who came asking for votes during election times.

Women of another community were treated very badly by their own husbands. As these women had no other source of livelihood available, they had to live with such violent husbands. But after acquiring skills in making and selling bead handicrafts, they started to earn livings on their own. Consequently, they formed a group and themselves fought the violent nature of their husbands.

Eventually the violence against women declined, and the women are now happy with their economic and collective power. Thus the women beneficiaries of these NGOs and the NGOs themselves showed that given good opportunity and proper skills, women can contribute equally to the society and nation as compared to men.

It can also be seen here that grassroots development is possible, when people at the grassroots level are properly motivated and educated. When they get education, skills and opportunity, they can bring about a change in the way society works and end discrimination against women and against the whole of humanity.

Cannot this success be replicated elsewhere in the world? In fact, everywhere in the world? Shouldn't the collective and educative powers be used to eradicate problems like HIV/AIDS, poverty, and so on?

Cannot such programmes be replicated to bring employment to local levels, and not just in big cities and metropolises? Seeing these examples, our answer to these questions should always be a clear *Yes*.

Suggested Reading

Women at Wheel. Humanscape, July 2003.

Women for Trees. Humanscape, December 2001.

Ashit N. CHANDARIA: Responsabilisation des Femmes à Travers des Activités Économiques et Éducatives

Généralement, dans plusieurs régions du monde ne sont pas dotées de chances et opportunités égales, notamment dans les domaines tels que l'éducation et le développement des capacités, qui pourrait les rendre autosuffisant. Donc, elles n'ont jamais la chance de prendre le devant et produire un changement dans leurs propres vies et dans la société de façon générale. Ayant reçu une formation, éducation et motivation appropriée, les femmes ne deviendront pas seulement économiquement indépendantes, mais elles pourront aussi produire des changements dans la société. Cet article va prouver cela en observant les progrès faits par dix-huit organisations non gouvernementales (ONG) à Gujarat en Inde. Des femmes ont commencé à avoir un revenu par elle-même, ont été éduquées, ont appris à propos de leurs droits et aussi ont appris à exercer des pouvoirs dans les co-opératives en formant des groupes entre elles. Dans beaucoup de cas, les femmes ont enregistré une baisse des violences domestiques et une croissance du respect à leur égard, de l'espoir et de la confiance en elle-même.

Ashit N. CHANDARIA: El Fortalecimiento de Mujeres a Través del Grupo Económico y Actividades Educativas

Generalmente en muchas partes del mundo no se dan mujeres iguales oportunidades, sobre todo en las áreas como la educación y la creación de habilidades que pudieran hacerlas autosuficientes. Así ellas nunca tienen la oportunidad de avanzar y provocar un cambio en sus propias vidas y en la sociedad. Pero dado el entrenamiento apropiado, educación y motivación, las mujeres no sólo pueden hacerse económicamente independientes, sino también provocar el cambio social. El artículo sigue para demostrar esto a través de la observación del progreso hecho por los beneficiarios de dieciocho organizaciones no-gubernamentales (NGOs) en Gujarat, India. Las mujeres empezaron ganando ellas mismas, se educaron, aprendieron sobre sus derechos y también aprendieron la influencia de los poderes de cooperación formando grupos entre ellas. En muchos casos, las mujeres que se informó disminuyeron la violencia doméstica y aumentaron el respeto, la esperanza y la confianza.

