

Development of women's leadership within the community mobilisation process



SOCIETY FOR EDUCATION, ANIMATION, RURAL CARE AND HEALTH (SEARCH)

Background

In 2009, Trócaire began to support a six-year community mobilisation programme through its partner organization, SEARCH in the Boipariguda and Khoirput Blocks of the Koraput and Malkangiri Districts in Odisha, India. The programme was designed with a view to support socially excluded communities such as tribals, dalits¹ and women in these districts, who suffer from high levels of discrimination and have little access to resources, government programmes and social security schemes. The programme specifically focused on women's empowerment and women's leadership development towards improving local governance and social justice. The programme intervention covered 65 villages in three Grampanchayats² of the two districts and engaged both men and women to work together towards women's empowerment and women leadership development through a community mobilisation process that included organising Community Based Organisations (CBOs) at different levels.

Strategies and Approaches

The disenfranchisement of women is largely due to lack of access to education, skill development, and income generation opportunities, which has a knock on effect on



▲ Women from Katpada Village

women's participation. In addition to the community mobilisation process, SEARCH have responded to this by promoting economic self-sufficiency for women through micro-loans and other schemes. This has been achieved through the forum of self-help groups and has over the years impacted the lives of thousands of women by providing income generation opportunities.

The second approach to women's empowerment has been education. This includes primarily awareness generation on issues relating to women's nutrition, reproductive health, the

¹ Term used for a section of Indian society traditionally considered 'untouchable'. The Constitution of India recognises them as 'Scheduled Caste'.

² Village - level statutory and democratic institution of local self-government with constitutional status under 73rd and 74th Amendments of the Indian Constitution.

importance of education and participating in the political process.

The third measure has to do with capacity building through various kinds of training that develop the women's skills and provide them with opportunities to step into leadership roles. A key approach used was to promote collaboration among members of a community in activities aimed at fostering the empowerment of women to have greater agency over the quality of their lives, by increasing the opportunities for meaningful social and political participation. While the concept and practice of 'women's empowerment' is fraught with multiple dimensions, it is commonly accepted that it includes certain fundamental elements such as autonomy, awareness, access to basic rights and capabilities, involvement in decision-making processes, and a particular level of power. All these may be reflected in the quantitative and qualitative aspects of the emerging leadership amongst women. SEARCH focused on building women's capacities and mobilising both men and women to form four types of community based organizations, in which women would play either an equal or a leading role: Village Development Committees, Panchayat Development Committees, Block Level People's Federations³, and Women's Self Help Groups.

The fourth strategic measure is to instil the ethos of participation among women. For example, SEARCH ensured the participation of women in all training courses, meetings and workshops. In order to make this happen, prior consultation was held with women leaders about the activities. It has also ensured 50% women representation in all Community Based Organizations and that lead positions be given to women in the executive body and



▲ Capacity Building of women from Bonda tribe, Malkangiri district

fostered the creation of some Community Based Organizations exclusively for women. A range of accompanying strategies were used, including:

- Establishing a foundation of women leaders, and supporting them to define problems, identify solutions and design strategic action plans.
- Creating shared spaces that enable women members to share their common concerns as well as their dreams, for their individual and collective lives.
- Involving women in village level micro planning through the method of Participatory Rural Appraisal.
- Creating awareness campaigns and providing gender sensitive trainings for both men and women in the community.

▼ Training sessions for women conducted by SEARCH



³ VDC, PDC and BLPF: People federations are formed in three levels (Village, Panchayat and Block) for organise/empower/enable community to assert their rights at large. These bodies are autonomous institutions of people and are not controlled by any external agencies.

- Coaching women to be champions of their own cause, and voice their concerns to the relevant officials and decision making authorities.
- Mobilising women to participate actively and consistently in all local governing bodies.
- Creating awareness about the importance of networking among women's groups.
- Emphasizing the significance of accountability and transparency through monitoring and evaluation mechanisms, both within the community and vis-à-vis local authorities.

Achievements indicating the emergence of women's leadership during last six years

The effort of SEARCH has directly impacted and fostered empowerment in the lives of about 9,000 women during the last six years. There is a perceptible difference in the extent of involvement of women at various levels of the political process. These may be observed in terms of degree of attendance, active participation, decision-making and advocacy initiatives taken up by the women representatives of the community. The following four tables illustrate such accomplishments at various levels of community mobilization.

Table 1: Achievements at village level

● Women from 45 villages of 3 Panchayats are currently in a position to identify and take strategic action to address their concerns by engaging with local authorities on their own.
● 192 women of 45 villages have become good leaders that are able to influence the authorities to make decisions in the favour of their community.
● Villagers from 40 villages presented 240 women-centred plans at village meetings (Pallisabha ⁴ and Gramsabha ⁵) and got them approved.
● 690 women participated in the most recently held Pallisabha in the 11 numbers villages. (6 pallisabha in Kathapada panchayat and 5 pallisabha in Chipakur Panchayat)
● 10 women leaders used print media to highlight the problem of a lack of drinking water in their areas. Following this, their engagement with the district administration resulted in the construction of 5 tube wells in 5 villages of Chipakur Panchayat, Koraput District.
● Women of Bonda Hills took the initiative to demand tube wells in 03 villages, the repair of a school building in one village and the activation of a government child care centre in another village.
● Women started a successful anti-alcohol movement in 15 villages.
● The work of 85 women Self Help Groups has resulted in enhanced economic growth and improved leadership and entrepreneurial qualities through income generation programmes that include 3 small goat-rearing businesses, 1 dairy business, 8 midday meal management schemes, 4 sound systems, 4 rice mills, 1 wood-selling business, 6 power tillers, 4 vegetable cultivation schemes, 1 rice and millet business, and 1 buffalo-rearing business.
● 100% sanitation (toilet construction) ensured in four villages.
● 100% immunization ensured in 52 villages.

⁴ Village and hamlet level meetings for all villagers to attend as part of India's system of local governance.

⁵ A body consisting of persons in the electoral register relating to a village comprised within the area of Panchayat.

Table 2: Achievements at Panchayat level

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● 334 women participated in the Gramsabha, Kathapada Gram Panchayat in the year 2015
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Every year, on average 250 women increase their knowledge on the importance of women in community development during the International Women’s Day celebrations of 3 Gram Panchayats.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● 16 women Panchayati Raj Institution members of 3 Gram Panchayats are now showing keen interest in participation at Panchayat level monthly nodal meetings and resolving the issues of the communities they represent.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Women leaders networked with the Panchayat Development Committees leaders of Kathapada Panchayat and solved irregularity the Public Distribution System there by highlighting the issue in the media. Subsequently complaints relating to electrification, delay in wage payment, sand casting, drinking water and road connectivity were addressed successfully.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Women’s participation in various fora such as the Panchayat nodal meeting, Block level meetings and advocacy visits to sub-division District offices have increased.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● 118 women from various Panchayats have increased their knowledge about different kinds of schemes and issues by participating in training during the last year.

Table – 3: Achievements at Block level and District Level

150 women in 31 villages have lobbied the government at Block level on issues such as pensions, job schemes, drinking water provision, housing, schools, provision of day meals at school for children and child care centres. Consequently, 73 women and 83 men from 11 villages received overdue wages, 25 women and 15 men from 14 villages received their pensions, 14 schools were regularized, and 15 houses were constructed under government housing schemes during the last six months.

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Women representatives of the Block Level People’s Federation met the District Collector and put their plan before him. As a result the Record of Rights (RoR) (under the Forest Rights Act, 2006⁶) distribution process was accelerated in Majhiguda and Kathapada Panchayats.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● 68 women leaders from two Blocks have increased their knowledge on government schemes for women and children, such as the Integrated Child Development Services, Maternal Health, etc. They are also aware of the right to participate in planning and decision making processes of Pallasabha/Gramsabha and the right to equal wages.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● 11 women of Block Level People’s Federation improved their knowledge on the Right To Information Act (RTI) and how to use it.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● There has been a marked increase in the unity and solidarity among women as also in their confidence levels to raise and resolve issues by visiting local authorities and talking face to face with government officials.

⁶ The Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006 popularly known as the Forest Rights Act 2006 is considered a ground-breaking legislation that intends to recognise the rights of millions of tribals and other forest dwellers in different parts of India as it provides for the restitution of deprived forest rights across the country, including both individual rights to cultivated land in forestland and community rights over common property resources.

Table 4: Increased levels of participation

LEVELS OF PARTICIPATION IN VARIOUS FORA: BASELINE VS. ENDLINE									
Village Development Committee		Pallisabha and Gramsabha		Participation in Discussions		Participation in Decision Making		Political Participation	
2009	2015	2009	2015	2009	2015	2009	2015	2009	2015
1-2%	75-80%	0%	Pallisabha: 70-80% Gramsabha: 50-60%	0%	70-80%	0%	50%	0%	50-60%

Positive changes in women's participation

The community mobilisation process has revealed important positive changes in women and in their lives. These included:

Increased confidence of women

"I am proud and happy that I am able to visit government offices and dialogue with government officials to solve our problems related to drinking water, electricity, housing,



▲ Tula Paraja, Kathapada village

land, and road connectivity. I have experienced this due to SEARCH's activities in my village. I was also able to motivate other women of the village to control the use of alcohol in the village. I now feel confident to attend the training and go to different places for village development work...I am happy that I am not alone in my attempt to work for a better village." - Tula Paraja, Kathapada Village.

"I am able to take other women of my village along with me to different government offices such as the Block and District administration offices to address problems such as electricity, safe drinking water, forest land titles and late payment of job schemes. I am happy that I am able to prepare women to present our village plan by conducting a mock Pallisabha meeting before the actual Pallisabha meeting. The training I have received has strengthened me to fight for rights of the women of my Panchayat"- Mindei Gollory, Patteipodor Village.

Empowered women and change in men's attitudes and behaviour towards women

"We started one Village Development Committee and under that banner we campaigned for control of the use of alcohol in our village, which was destroying the foundation of our village. Then we marched ahead in thinking for the village and managed to get a village road and a school built. The school is key for the education of our children in order to help them have a bright future. We are able to think now together with the men of our village and even they are involving us in all matters of the village" - Uthei Pangi, Thalapodor Village.

Participation in preparation and implementation of village development plans and women-centred plans



▲ Bati Minervalia, Boroti Village.

"I am a widow and today I am able to be involved in village development. Years back a widow had no value in the village and I used to lead a miserable life. But today due to the teachings we have received, the attitude of the community towards widows has changed and we can play an equal role as members of the village. I stood for my village and managed to mobilise a school, road, electricity, drinking water and ensured proper management of the lunch scheme in the school. I am also involved in regular monitoring of the school and other development programmes in the village. I have opened my eyes for the good of the village and I want all women and men in my village to think about establishing a good environment where we all can live in peace." - Bati Minervalia, Boroti Village.

"I am the Vice President of Maa Kali Village Development Committee and we prepared a very good development plan for my village which was submitted to the Pallisabha and Gramsabha. We managed to get road

connectivity, drinking water and pensions approved for our village. If we had not organized ourselves, then we would not have been in a position to do this." - Lakhmi Pangri, Krissal village, Chipakur Panchayat.

"Being a member of the Village Development Committee and the Self Help Group, I was able to learn a lot, especially about planning for my village after deliberating on key issues affecting the village. In this way I was also able to develop my leadership skills. Now I am an elected Ward Member⁷ and I am able to submit and get approved women-centred plans for my village along with the general village plan in the Gramsabha. I am able to actively take part in Panchayat nodal meetings and share my concerns and raise my voice regarding various issues in my area. I would not be involved like this if I had not received various training courses and orientation as a member of the Village Development Committee and Self Help Group. I have no fear now and I can stand and talk in front of anyone. I make sure that many women like me participate in Pallisabha and Gramsabha meetings". - Rathnamani Khora, Kathapada village.

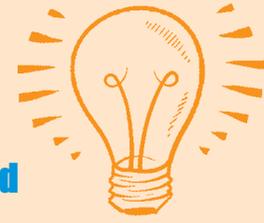


▲ Rathnamani Khora, Kathapada village.

⁷ Ward member: Lowest elected person of the Panchayat (village-level statutory institution of local self-government) in India.

Challenges

- Since gender inequality is a deeply pervasive issue, organizations like SEARCH need to have organisational capacity to address it more effectively and efficiently. This requires active strategic planning processes that will expand their scope on fostering women's empowerment. It also necessarily implies that there is a need to mobilize steady revenue from diversified sources in order to continue such work. This is a challenge considering that funding for development work is on the decrease and particularly so in the domain of women's empowerment.
- Secondly, because gender discrimination and denial of women's rights are systemic, deep-rooted problems with religious, cultural and economic dimensions across society, it is difficult to achieve equity at deeper structural levels, given the limited scope of women's empowerment work done in the framework of a community mobilisation process. In some cases, such as the anti-liquor campaign, ensuring equal participation of men and women within CBOs, sharing women success stories in CBO meetings and using different gender tools with men and CBO leaders, there has been a significant degree of empowerment and visibility of women's leadership. But in most cases, "empowerment" remains restricted to income generation, skill development and emerging leadership at local levels. While there are individual cases of strong leadership, how to bring about structural and holistic empowerment is still a question that needs to be confronted and addressed.
- Thirdly, decision-making platforms such as the Pallisabha and Gramsabha are not very conducive for women's participation despite efforts by women to use these (see achievements above). To address this challenge, the programme included strategies such as building awareness of the community on the importance and potential of the Pallisabha and Gramsabha, preparing village plans with the community, helping women to prepare plans that specifically address their needs to be included as part of the overall village plans and strengthening women Panchayat representatives on their role and functioning has been a process of addressing this challenge but it still continuing.
- Lastly, a significant challenge is the heavy work load of women which restricts their participation. SEARCH tried to address this challenge through discussions at CBO level on the various obstacles faced by women to participate in decision-making platforms and sharing household responsibility with men as a measure to enable more participation.



Lesson Learned

- It is necessary to organize "visioning" sessions that invite women members to share their concerns, and aspirations for their individual lives as well as communities, then combining them into a collective vision.
- It is essential to understand the importance of creating a situation in which people affected by a problem are part of its solution. Women leaders must be encouraged to develop their own strategies and solutions to address their concerns.
- A community can be considered "mobilised" and its women "empowered" when members of all genders unanimously feel that gender equity and the issue of women's and girls' empowerment is important to them and worthy of their strategic action and support.

Conclusion

From the narratives of the women, one gathers that being part of the community mobilisation process has provided an entire new avenue of growth for them, both at an individual level as well as at a collective level. Participation in the Village Development Committee meetings and Self Help Group activities has brought about the ability to talk to outsiders, meaning government officials and bank representatives. It has given them the confidence to visit banks and government offices, as also the long anticipated courage to raise issues pertaining to local governance. It has also brought about the awareness that personal problems are not just individual private issues but are linked to systemic imbalances that must be addressed collectively through participation in the political process.

Women's empowerment can only be accomplished through a continual process of advancing women's knowledge base through both formal and informal education, economic independence via income generating activities, involvement in the decision making and policy-making process through political participation and leadership at various levels, and ability to have control over their own lives. Work aimed at

bringing about gender equity must involve attitudinal change within all segments of society. In addition, organizations like SEARCH must explore opportunities to network with other civil society actors with similar objectives for collaborative partnership. Given the magnitude of gender inequality in society, networking is fundamental to increasing awareness on issues, strategically addressing various concerns, and promoting overall women empowerment and leadership.

Solutions to address gender injustice also need to be multi-dimensional and holistic involving various sectors of society. Organizations like SEARCH, due to their mission-focused nature, are in a unique position to play pivotal roles to link various players including the general public, communities, religious groups, governments, and businesses. It is imperative at this stage therefore that the work of such organizations be supported by all stakeholders of the development process.

Contributed by:



**SOCIETY FOR EDUCATION ANIMATION AND RURAL CARE HEALTH
(SEARCH)**

At: Boipariguda, Po: Doraguda (Mundaguda), Koraput-764043
Tel. No. 09439091199(M)
Email ID: search.org@rediffmail.com,
kalyanisearch@rediffmail.com

Photo Credit: SEARCH



Trócaire India Office
S-30, Phase-II, Maitri Vihar Road
Maitri Vihar, Bhubaneswar-751023

www.trocaire.org