

Empowering Self-Help Groups to Address Gender Inequity

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Abstract

The entire world is preparing to meet the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) set by United Nations to reduce poverty, improve the lives of the poor and increase the pace of development in a sustainable manner. India has also set targets for its tenth five-year plan in accordance with the MDGs. But indicators such as Child Mortality Rates (CMR), Maternal Mortality Rates (MMR), vaccination, incidence of malnutrition in children, and female literacy are major impediments in India's efforts to meet the MDGs. Higher risk to child health results in increased birth rate. Poverty, poor health and education are inter-linked and put direct pressure on natural resources. Low level of literacy among women also has its environmental impact.

In the forthcoming Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (DESD 2005-2015), Gender Equity is considered as one of the key action themes. Gender inequity, directly reflects on the development indicators of a country. In the field of education, the female literacy rate in India slightly higher than fifty percent, clearly reflects that development efforts have not been in the desired direction.

Any strategy for environmentally sound development needs awareness, help and active participation of the citizens. Hence the most important task for environmental education for sustainable development whether it is agricultural sustainability or the sustainability of development for rural masses, must be to ensure people's participation in community action. Now the question is how to organize or ensure the participation of common people to save our common future?

During the past few years in several parts of the country, the rural poor especially women are being organized into self-help groups (SHGs) in large numbers. According to a report by National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development (NABARD), the number of active SHGs in India had touched a figure of 8,67,041 by March 2003. Going by the average group size of 12-15 members, a population of around 15 million comprising mainly of women falls in this informal organized sector. Most of the SHG members are from regions of high poverty, low levels of agricultural surpluses, scanty resources and underdeveloped infrastructure. Other major constraints are illiteracy and low levels of entrepreneurial skills.

Generally the focus of these groups is on micro-credit, to create employment opportunities for rural women. Most groups are strong collectives of women with certain amount of skills already acquired. The common objective underlying the formation of the groups is the capacity building of its members for sustainable development and conservation.

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Going by the example of Mahila Smakhya, a well-known institution working for the empowerment of women, these groups address all issues related to health, education, economic empowerment, violence, etc. The groups thus formed are very cohesive and disciplined, capable of finding solutions to their local problems including fighting legal battles too. Their main emphasis lies on capacity building in the field of agriculture, organic farming and other employment generation activities using local resources.

In mountain areas, where infrastructure is poor, people are more dependent on natural resources for livelihood. Women have very high workloads, due to high migration rates of men for work. With little education and technological know-how, women are left to struggle with infertile marginal agricultural lands, diminishing natural resources as well as insufficient health and infrastructural facilities to nurture their families. Women's SGHs in mountain areas are therefore, in need of education and communication skills. CEE Himalaya has taken an initiative by implementing conservation programmes for women in Dal lake in Kashmir and Nanda Devi Bio-Reserve in Uttaranchal to ensure both ecological benefits and economic well being.

India has 300 million poor people with no access to basic educational skills, opportunities or jobs. Seventy percent of India lives in the villages and majority of the people are mainly dependent on agriculture. Eighty to eighty- five per cent of the agriculture work is done by women starting from sowing to harvesting the crops.

'Women Feed the World' was the theme for the World Food Day observed by FAO in 1998. Women play an important role in food production, processing and even in distribution. It is unfortunate that women and children are so vulnerable both from the point of view of food as well as nutritional security. Indicators other than education and nutrition, for example, Child Mortality Rates (CMR), Maternal Mortality Rates (MMR), have a direct bearing on this situation.

With agriculture becoming cost and labour intensive, incidences of male migration towards towns for earning money through other development work are prevalent. Women without much of technical skills are exposed greatly to agriculture and allied activities..

With changing roles, women are now also exposed to the struggle for livelihood. Lack of adequate levels of education and technical skills makes them generally dependent either on agriculture or forests. To fulfil their traditional role of feeding the families also they are dependent on resources such as water, energy and forests, sometimes presenting them as the main consumers of natural resources. With the increase in population, demand for natural resources is also increasing beyond the carrying capacity, the land base per person is shrinking,

posing challenges of maintaining the soil health while obtaining more and more from less area and quality of land. Water is another resource becoming scanty and poses a threat in getting the optimum yields from the marginalised lands.

Sustainable development reflects that today's economic progress should not be at the expense of tomorrow's development prospects. Agricultural sustainability refers to the maintenance and enhancement of productivity on a long-term basis and use of improved and friendly technologies for economic development of the agriculture sector. As a result of continued mining of soil and over exploitation of water resources, we have reached a stage where any further neglect and slackness in using soil and water resources in a sustainable manner will not only restrict our ability to feed the increasing population, but also result in adverse environmental consequences which would not be easily retrieved.

Key areas identified for sustainable development include:

Society: an understanding of social institutions and their role in change and development, as well as the democratic and participatory systems which give opportunity for the expression of opinion, the selection of governments, the forging of consensus and the resolution of differences.

Environment: an awareness of the resources and fragility of the physical environment and the effects of human activity on it and decisions with a complement to factoring environmental concerns into social and economic development.

Economy: a sensitivity to the limits and potential of economic growth and their impact on society and on environment, with a commitment to assess personal and societal levels of consumption out of concern for the environment and for social justice.

What is required today is that these concerns may not remain restricted to a group of elite class to plan, to act or to decide rather, should percolate down to every human being in order to achieve their participation in finding solutions to the problem. Sensitization of humanity as a whole towards global concerns is required. Education is the only tool through which this can be achieved. Education is a term, which is concerned with learning. Learning is a process of acquiring knowledge or skills by instruction, study or experience. In its broad sense, this is a life-long process but the modern world education is not only a process of learning and becoming wise but also a tool at one's command to survive in this age of development. Education is an effective tool for the uplift of an individual and society in every way whether it is personality development, social and economic development and so on. This is the only way to bring about prosperity.

Education has been an important part of Indian social and cultural life. A great deal of evidence is there in *Vedic* literature about the satisfactory status of women's education. There existed extensive and wide spread child education systems irrespective of gender in the country during earlier days. But gender disparity is prevalent these days both in urban and rural areas, though recently the female literacy rates have increased faster than the male literacy rates for the decade. The gap in male and female literacy rate still stands at 21.69 per cent for the population of above five years of age.

To address the immediate problem of education focusing on the informal sector is also equally important. In order to involve community-based organisations and civil society groups in the entire range of development-related activities, a conscious component of education for sustainable development is a definite need. These groups are important for discovering what issues of sustainable development are relevant locally and so should be sensitized to using their knowledge to build public awareness, introduce local knowledge into the school setting and orient their own members to more sustainable practices.

The workplace is a suitable domain of learning with regard to sustainable development. Every workplace should consider how daily working practices and relationships are related to sustainable development and explicit commitment to positive practices should be included in the procedures and manuals of the institution.

Self-Help Groups formed throughout the country, successfully handling complicated matters like micro financing, are potential target groups to be addressed for education for sustainable future. These are the groups close to nature, depending directly on the natural resources for their livelihood. Most of these are women groups comprising a majority of illiterate women. NGOs at different levels are involved in building the capacities of these groups with the main focus on saving and micro credit.

These collectives endow a great potential for addressing them through effective education and communication tools towards the concept and need for sustainability. Mahila Samakhyas, a major women-focused programme of the Department of Education reaches to more than one lakh women in ten states. The programme creates a forum and environment for women's education at the community level. Women are organised in groups, educated to a certain level, adequate to help them understand the issues of health, hygiene, importance of children's education and their 'rights as women'. Successful efforts have also been made to build their capacity in the field of agriculture and other activities that can improve their economic conditions. These women are successfully practicing the techniques of organic farming and composting, etc. and have set examples for their male counterparts. Some of them have been groomed as resource persons in the field to educate fellow men and women.

The Centre for Environment Education (CEE) through its field programmes has also aimed at creating awareness among the communities about the ecological significance of the forest areas around which they live. For example, it launched the first Eco-education programme around the Ranthambhore National Park in Rajasthan. A field office was set up in 1987 at Sawai Madhopur near Ranthambhore for implementation of various educational and developmental programmes in selected villages around the park. The focus of the programme has been on environmental improvement by people themselves through environmentally-sound technologies. Communication and education programmes were developed in the area of animal husbandry. Another project – Hingolghadh Ecodevelopment was initiated in six villages around the Hingolghadh Nature Education Park in Rajkot district of Gujarat. Today the project continues activities in 15 such villages and has extended its activities to 25 other villages not directly dependent on the sanctuary.

There are many examples from other parts of country such as the SEWA movement in Gujarat, CHIPKO Uttarakhand followed by a parallel movement in south where the community and women have been organised, educated and have fought for sustainable utilisation of the natural resources. Taking strength from these experiences, strategies to address the informal organised sector of the self-help groups need to be evolved. Environmental education and research are critical not only for the establishment of sustainable human societies but also to develop technologies, skills and expertise which translate into tailor-made solutions to environmental problems.

Many NGOs are working with the SHGs to build their capacities in order to improve their economic conditions. These may act as partners in identification of needs of villages for technologies, development of training modules as well as the delivery of technology at the village level. Awareness programmes on sustainable resource utilization should also focus on local governance including the *Zila Parishads*, *Village Panchayats* and Village Education Committees, etc.

In the mountain areas due to less development in comparison to plains, the dependency of women is more on their immediate environment for meeting the basic needs of water, fuel, fodder and livelihood at times. There is a global concern on the threats to mountain environment, which directly may affect the mountain people and have adverse effects down the mountains also. Shortage of water and deforestation has added tremendously to the drudgery of women. Mountains have their peculiar problems with high incidence of male migration towards the cities and towns leaving women behind to take care of the family. This has increased the working hours for women from 12-16 hours a day.

Problems are aggravated many times due to the conservation measures being taken by the government to minimise the threats to ecosystems and species of flora and fauna resulting in conflicts in these areas. The current levels of field conservation are not adequate to contain these adverse trends especially because the communities living in and around protected areas are among the most disadvantaged due to inadequate and inappropriate inputs in rural development and welfare programmes. Since their dependence on natural bio-resources is substantial, their well being and safeguarding of the natural ecosystems, new 'landscape-based' strategies for ecologically sustainable rural development are called for. These have to be backed by packaged alternatives for local people in the form of efficient but conservation-friendly utilisation practices for bio-resources as well as supplemental livelihood.

It is necessary to develop and introduce appropriate or green technologies coupled with sound delivery systems, which ensure economic and ecological sustainability and optimum use of local resources emphasizing on capacity building and technological empowerment among mountain and hill communities, particularly the disadvantaged groups. Major thrust areas for technology transfer include – sustainable agriculture, off season vegetable and seed production, organic farming, non-perishable cultivation (NPC), horticulture, green cover management, protection from wild animals, animal husbandry, traditional use of water power, non-wood energy, disaster management and landslide control, artisans, water management and harvesting, non-timber forest produce, herbs and other biomass production, ecotourism, etc.

Our country is uniquely placed for organic cultivation due to various agroclimatic regions for production of several potential crops in demand. Being a low chemical fertiliser consuming country especially in rain-fed areas such as the north-eastern and hill states, India has good opportunity to take up production of organic food for export and domestic use. IFOAM Survey 2003 has indicated that India has about 41000 ha land under organic cultivation, which is only 0.03 % of the total cultivable land in India.

Experience in the area of agriculture and watershed management has indicated that the failure of many agriculture programmes in developing countries could be directly related to the neglect of women's productive roles, particularly in relation to food crop production. Generally women farmers are more receptive to innovations and incentives. Many studies conducted in developing countries have shown that giving women farmers the same level of agricultural inputs and education as men farmers could increase yields by more than 20 %.

Women/Rural Technology Parks have proven effective communication tools to provide demonstration and training on need-based selected technologies and promoting rural entrepreneurship among mountain communities. Women Technology Park set up by HESCO in Uttaranchal, Rural Technology Park by BOSCO Reach Out Society in Ribhoi district of Meghalaya and a similar approach by Janaadhar Society in Uttarkashi, Uttaranchal are such examples.

CEE Himalaya is at present dealing with two projects focusing on women's participation in natural resource management. The first project supported by UNESCO focuses on capacity building of women from the buffer zone of Nanda Devi Bio-Reserve (NDBR) in Uttaranchal for conservation of genetic resources, mostly underutilized and lesser known, using alternate media. Another project aims at creating awareness among women on health, hygiene and sanitation issues in order to conserve the Dal Lake in Kashmir (supported by Mridula Sarabhai Trust, India). Both these projects are very challenging and enriching in experience. Since the communities are closely associated with their surroundings and with time they have evolved their own perceptions about the management of these resources, communicating scientific ways to them for conservation is important. Another challenge is the suitable mode of communication when the conventional methods, both print and electronic, are not suitable. The NDBR project includes a component of studying the suitability of alternate media as a tool for communication.