



Consolidating Rural Woman Power Key to Social Development

N. S. Ramesh Chandran¹

ABSTRACT: The unexplored and unexploited power of rural women deeply ensnared in unproductive rustic life still remains disregarded in our country. We have sufficient funds and a large number of welfare programmes. Why then there is no expected outcome? The article focuses on the necessity of devising a professional mechanism so that the gains of all empowerment projects reach out to beneficiaries entirely. A persuasive partnership between Community Development Agencies and Government Departments is also imperative to unearth the hidden potentialities of rural women, mobilize their efforts and synergize or rather network their entrepreneurial abilities for self-sustenance and social development. A psychological approach, hitherto ignored should be looked into. The goal is to generate inquisitiveness and quest for freedom, the driving force which emancipates women from fear, insecurity and difficult life situations.

Keywords: Professional mechanism, Empowerment, synergize, Entrepreneurial abilities, Self-sustenance



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1. Introduction

“India does not live in its towns but in its villages”, says the Father of our nation. It is a great vision to drive our thoughts to take notice of the unexplored and unexploited power of rural women deeply ensnared in unproductive rustic life. Women are undeniably the richest resources of any country. Yet they are grossly underused. Unfortunately, when we talk about women empowerment, discussions and debates just get restricted to political realms, ultimately ending up in 33% of seat reservation in Parliament. Indeed, it is a welcome step and a quantum leap. There should not be any lapse from any quarters whatsoever, from accomplishing that agenda. But what about the other 67% of women? Or is it that the competence of these unprivileged women is too inconsequential to be overlooked in the process of nation-building? “The creativity and talents of all women are invaluable resources, which can and should be developed both for their own self-realization and for the benefit of society as a whole. Women’s work not only sustains their families but also makes a major contribution to socio-economic progress”. (Millennium development goal 3 - UNIDO)

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Reservation or not, the fact of the matter is that our country cannot afford to spurn the skills, talents, interests, and creativities of women in villages in the pursuit of community development. Empowerment should not be seen simply as a mechanism to capture power or find out a placement for generating income. More than that, it should be an exercise of supporting women to unearth their hidden potentialities and to motivate them to bring out ingenious output for bracing social development. "Women's empowerment" as delineated by the United Nations Population Information Network (POPIN) has five components: "Women's sense of self-worth; their right to have and to determine choices; their right to have access to opportunities and resources; their right to have the power to control their own lives, both within and outside the home; and their ability to influence the direction of social change to create a more just social and economic order, nationally and internationally".

Capacity building is a process which paves the way for self-awareness, self-confidence and self-esteem which will bolster the outlook of women; thereby they will be able to break the shell of reticence and make their presence everywhere. But that cannot be made possible through short cut methods such as granting paltry privileges or measly monetary benefits. On the other hand, there must be a professional physical approach and more importantly a concerted psychological approach to uplift their lives. Overwhelming will be the transformation of a woman once she catches hold of a shift in attitude and gets an insight into her aptitude. These changes cannot be expected to emerge spontaneously. Only by working out a persuasive partnership between Community Development Agencies and Government Departments, will it be possible to achieve the goals within a schema designed for the purpose. In this endeavor female social workers, by virtue of their feminine clout, will have a decisive role to play.

The article makes an attempt to examine the possibilities for trying to bring all rural women under development fold by helping them unearth their potentialities, mobilize their efforts and synergizes or rather network their entrepreneurial abilities for self-sustenance and community empowerment. The focus is on identifying every welfare measure and taking out the gains entirely to the beneficiaries leaving no stone unturned. The task should be seen as a formidable effort to give women a much-needed uplift and a great fillip to take the Nation forward.

2. Intervention for identification and implementation of welfare programmes

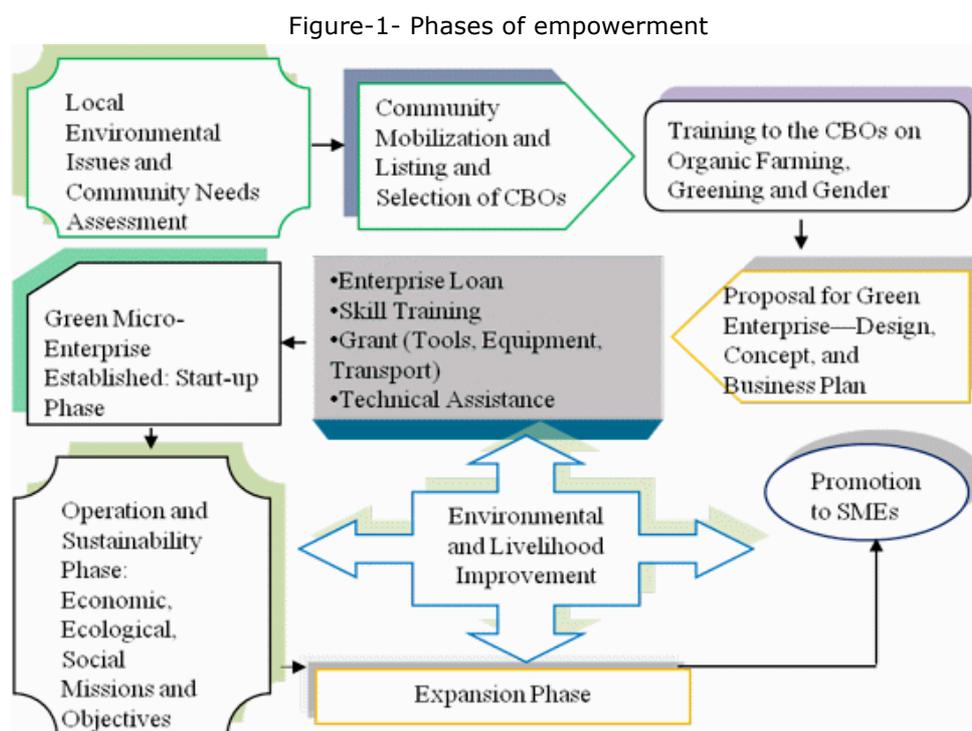
It is wrong to think that our country has neither sufficient funds nor administrative initiative to take care of our women in villages. Just look at the various rural development programmes introduced by the Government. Indira Awas Yojana (IAY), Development of women and children in Rural Areas (DWCRA), Swarnajayanti Gram Swarajgar Yojana (SGSY), Rashtriya Mahilakosh (RMK), Training for Rural Youth and Self Employment (TRYSEM), Jawahar Gram Samridhi Yojana (JGSY), Under the Accelerated Rural Water Supply Programme (ARWSP), Jawahar Rozgar Yojana (JRY), Kasturba Gandhi Memorial Trust, All India Women's Education Fund Association, National Social Assistance Programme (NSAP) etc are a few to mention, for the list still goes further. Therefore it is not the dearth of social welfare programmes, rather it is the inability and inertia to implement them in letter and spirit, which is what keeps women in poor light.

Strangely in our country, the dynamism shown by politicians and administrators in formulating social policies and projects is often found to wither away in the matter of translating them into virtual actions. One of the major recommendations in the National Plan of Action framed for the empowerment of women long back in 2005 was building and strengthening partnerships with civil society, particularly women's organizations. But what have we done to bring it into effect? Is there any agency to gauge the success of the programme? Let us come to the simple understanding that no new project is going to make better changes and what is necessary is a sort of professional reorientation to bring out results within the parameters existing today.

We require expert machinery for taking rapid actions to override the current state of torpor so that each and every welfare project is timely identified, executed in toto, monitored, reviewed and evaluated within a specific time perspective. Still more important is the coordination of the services delivered through various schemes. An effective management information system (MIS) is necessary to track and evaluate the progress of executing the programmes. The new system contemplated should be put under the control of local panchayats; also that the proposed arrangement has to be manned and steered by experienced professional social workers. The modus operandi should be innovative to work out good results. Here we have to make use of participatory learning and action (PLA) as a complementary component along with community organization, which will act as catalysts for change. The benefits catered to the local women thereby, will strengthen their participation in community activities and promote collaborative attitudes for achieving need-based goals. Two important tasks of a community worker are to keep the local women informed of all the welfare activities and to assess social needs. "From a community perspective, the social work role is to conduct assessments and share information with the identified community of interest". (Cyndi Hall, CASW). Easy accessibility to information, development of an exploratory mindset, willingness to take up creative pursuits, sensitivity to progressive social changes and above all persuasive bid to reap the benefits of welfare initiatives of the Government are the social indicators which reflect the sinews of a rural woman, nay the entire nation.

Today the success of community-based services is largely dependent on information and communication technology. We have to bear in mind that rural women like their counterparts in urban areas are equally influenced by information technology. Social workers have to make use of such intangible factors to the fullest possible extent and bring out phenomenal changes in them. "In the process of women empowerment, the ICTs (Information and Communication Technologies) are also playing a major role especially through technologies like cell phones and the internet. The cell phone is an extremely efficient ICT for the empowerment of women." (Dr. M. Arivanandan, 2013). "Information system specially designed for the rural poor has to be need-based because this group has been worst affected by the process of globalization. Their information needs will encompass their economic, social and familial roles". (VOLUNTARY ASSOCIATION FOR PEOPLE SERVICE - VAPS).

Figure-1 gives an idea about the operational phases which facilitate growth and development of rural women.



Every phase demonstrates a great possibility for replenishing ability drives and consolidating capabilities. Social workers have to differentiate the concept of ability from that of aptitude. "Ability is also popularly known as 'intelligence'. Intelligence is flexibility and versatility in the use of symbolic processes, ie, the capacity to symbolically manipulate the environment for adjustment or to find a solution to a problem, leading to better adjustment." "Aptitude is concerned with the future performance, ie, what can be achieved if a certain type of training appropriate to the skill concerned is given to the individual", (S.Narayana Rao, 2010). This knowledge is very much essential for social workers while adopting a psychological approach to social development.

3. Education for skill development at grass root level

A pat on the back is enough to rouse women's enthusiasm to take up more responsible activities besides child-rearing and involving in household chores. Obviously, the capital required for the purpose is skill development. "Skill development in rural women on small scale is the only solution to the problems of unemployment and proper utilization of both human and non-human resources and improving the living conditions of the poor masses". (Dr. Bhavna Verma, 2015). "Rural women are active agents of economic and social change and environmental protection who are, in many ways and to various degrees, constrained in their roles as farmers, producers, investors, caregivers, and consumers". (UN Women Watch, 2012).

The fundamental duty of a social work agency is to educate and enlighten the women of the locality as to how much important are their services to the community, be it rural or urban. Only if a woman gets convinced of her ingenious skills, will she realize that she has a greater role to play

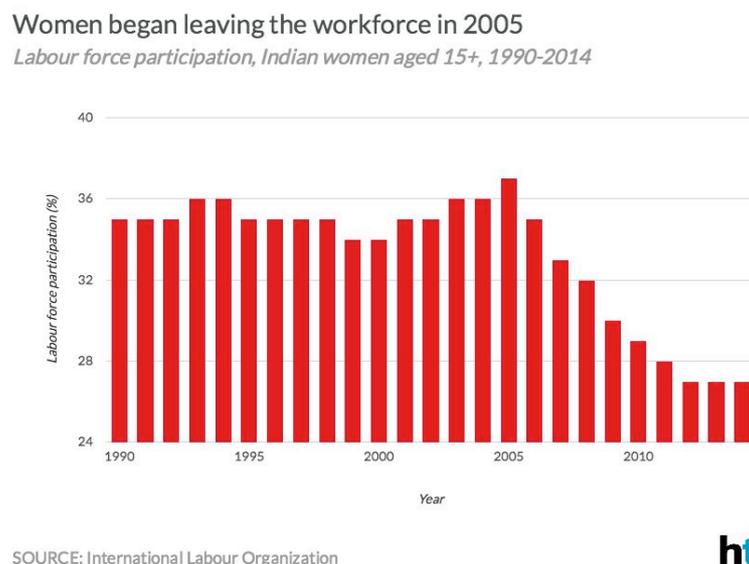
not only in her growth and development but also in community's welfare. It is a state of awakening which helps her redefine her roles and rediscover her resourcefulness. Thenceforth she will feel the necessity of building up social capital in a big way.

Skill development is not just a process of providing vocational training for the sake of finding out an employment for subsistence. More than that it creates the expertise, enhances productivity, heightens performance, improves gender relations and positions gender equations fairly. It opens the portals of sustainable employment and self-empowerment. Awards and rewards are very much necessary to encourage, endorse and recognize their achievements. These are all contributory attributes in the process of community development. Social workers should arrange weekly meetings with the women of every ward to have meaningful dialogues and interactions which will become evocative of social responsibilities.

The influence of globalization pressurizes an average village woman to deviate from the conventional type of occupations which are rather stereotyped and mechanical; in lieu, she wants to move towards specialized and skill oriented jobs for livelihood. The emerging markets are also an added attraction. Nevertheless, the shift in perception or at least a predisposition to constructive changes may be seen as a step forward which can mobilize potentialities for capitalizing on creative output and sustainability.

Look at figure – 2, which depicts the steep decline of labour participation of Indian women since 2005.

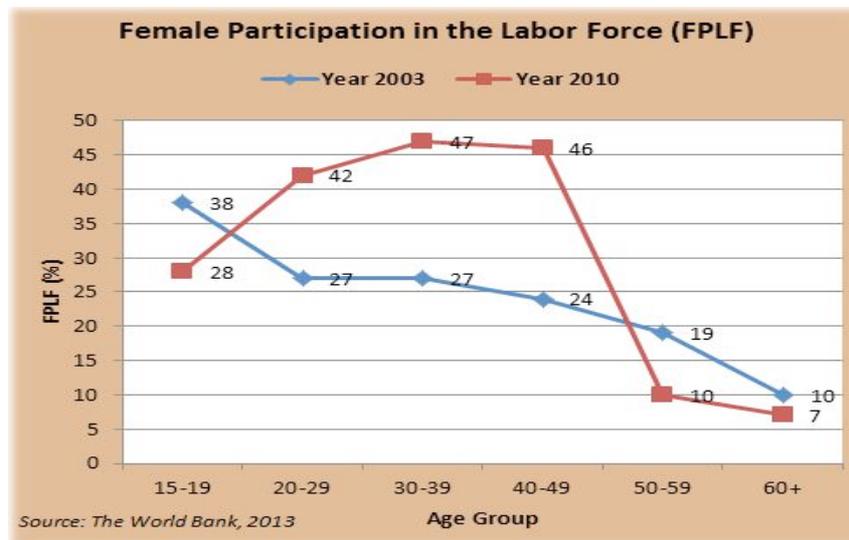
Figure – 2 depicts the steep decline of labour participation since 2005



Female participation in the labour force observed all over the world is found to have come down significantly. Fig – 3 shows that the graph in respect of female participation in labour force (FPLF) has dropped from 47% to 7% in 2010. (World Bank, 2013). It is a telling pointer that an average woman's frame of mind has now changed a lot which is conducive to make an intervention for

maximizing skill development in specific areas and for creating greater opportunities. Maybe an Economist would like to see the phenomenon from a different angle. The economic view may be to endorse that enormous industrial growth has slowed down agricultural economy which has brought down FPLF. Notwithstanding the various reasons attributed, what is to be examined is the initiative to be put in, to make a transformation in conformity with the demand of time.

Fig - 3 Female participation in labour force



“Vocational Education and Training (VET) can make a big difference for many of the rural poor and women by improving household productivity, employability, and income-earning opportunities and also for enhancing food security and promoting environmentally sustainable rural development and livelihoods”. (Dr. R. Vijaya Anuradha¹ and Dr. G. Lokanadha Reddy, 2013).

The spotlight of skill development should not be focused on agricultural activities alone. Education and training for rural women have to cover a wide spectrum of resourceful activities including nonagricultural pursuits. How to make them virtually technical and technological savvy, is the larger question to be taken up in skill development. The programmes envisioned for skill development should be supportive in every respect to achieve the Millennium Development Goals 3: ‘promotion of gender equality and the empowerment of women’. The three indicators of MGD 3 are:

- Eliminate gender disparities in education;
- Increase women’s economic independence and access to economic resources;
- Increase women’s participation in and influence on political decision-making.

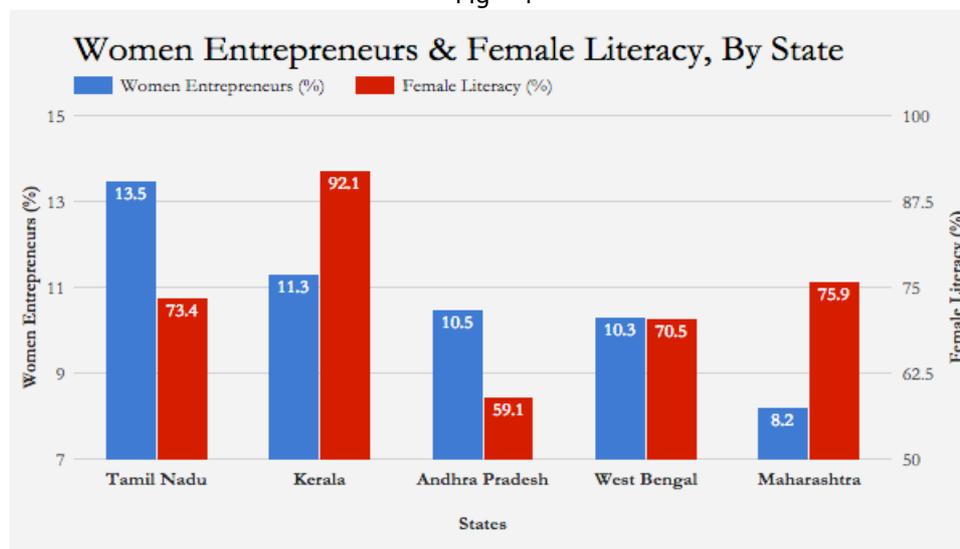
4. Promoting and networking women entrepreneurship

“Entrepreneurship is an active, multidimensional process, which helps women to realize their full identity and power in all spheres of life”. (Mrs. Manashi Mazumdar and Mrs. Marjina Ahmed,

2015). Women should have a say in shaping the rural economy. It is not only a question of the economic status of women but also about the financial health of a village. The precious intangible gains a woman reaps from entrepreneurship are self-esteem and self-confidence. Nothing gives her a greater support and independence than making use of her commercial interests and talents to do a business on her own. But it requires literacy and inextricable association with self-help groups (SHGs). As a matter of fact, the major component which promotes the entrepreneurial ability of rural women is literacy.

The bar chart (Fig - 4) demonstrates the link between women entrepreneurship and female literacy in some of the States.

Fig - 4



Source: Economic Census 2012, Men and Women 2011

“Widespread illiteracy, low levels of education and lack of training and business education and experience can limit the capacity of rural women entrepreneurs to consolidate sustainable enterprises”. (Joni Simpson, 2010). Literacy is the magic wand which takes an individual to the world of information, knowledge, and wisdom. It is only natural that one’s life does end up in total failure once deprived of literacy. Let us, therefore, give the highest priority to literacy in the process of nation-building. According to the census 2011, the female literacy rate of India is found to be 65.46%. (Indiafacts, 2013). Barring a few States like Kerala (91.98%), Mizoram (89.4%) etc, the majority of other States are lagging much behind. The National Literacy Mission has a long way to go for reaching the target of 100%. Social work agencies have a larger responsibility to join hands with the National Literacy Mission to accomplish the task.

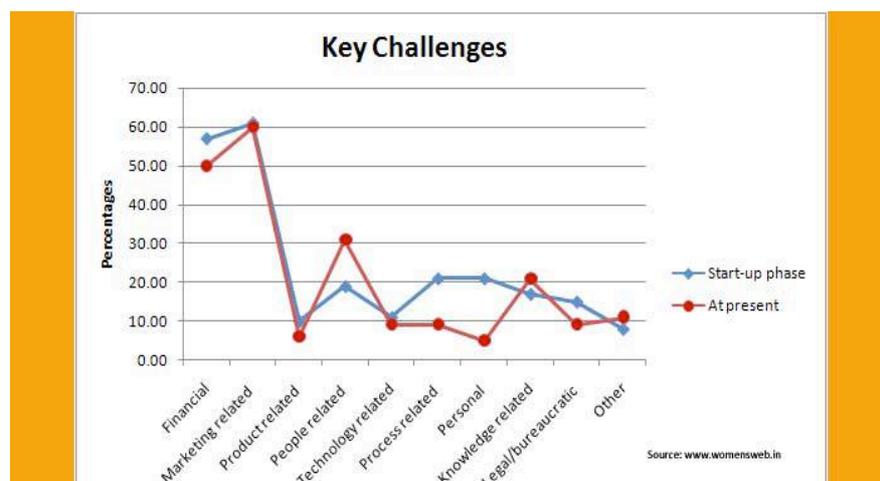
“SHG is a holistic programme of micro-enterprises covering all aspects of self-employment, an organization of the rural poor into self Help groups and their capacity building, planning of activity clusters, infrastructure build-up, technology, credit, and marketing”. (Neha Mishra, 2016). A self-help group is a platform for a woman entrepreneur to take advantage of the collective responsibility for fetching all members good economic returns. The group dynamics developed from mutual help and individual experience of the members to play a very important role in

delivering excellent outputs. A large number of women entrepreneurs in rural areas have to depend on micro credit facilities sponsored by SHGs for building up a stable and secure enterprise. It deserves mentioning here that Kerala is a State which has taken certain outstanding steps in mobilizing and consolidating women strength in community development. The Kudumbashree, a female-oriented project of the Government of Kerala, was launched in 1998 as a poverty eradication programme. The mission of Kudumbashree focuses on three major components: Micro-credit, Entrepreneurship, and Empowerment. The other States too, can initiate similar steps based on Kudumbashree model to identify the capabilities of women and to promote their business talents for poverty alleviation and self-sustenance.

The State Governments and the Central Government should come out with liberal policies to augment the scope of SHGs and the sphere of activities by providing more space to women entrepreneurship in villages. In this regard, the National Bank For Agriculture and Rural Development (NABARD) can as well make use of the services of professional social workers who have an unambiguous vision of social development and human development.

While discussing women entrepreneurship we have to look into the challenges arising from different quarters. The perceptible threat that looms large is market accessibility.

Figure 5: Illustrates the key challenges experienced by women entrepreneurs.



Source: www.womensweb.in

Here again, intervention on the part of the Government is imperative. The supportive policies of the Government and the services extended by social development organizations should help them overcome and overpower the aforesaid challenges and provide as many opportunities as possible.

Any study to ameliorate the competence of rural women will be incomplete sans looking into the benefits of gender budgeting. Gender budgeting, introduced in 2005, is a financial exercise not only to address the vulnerabilities of women but also to ensure equality of women with men. According to the Ministry of Women and Child Development, "Gender Budgeting is a powerful tool for achieving gender mainstreaming so as to ensure that benefits of development reach women as much as men. It is not an accounting exercise but an ongoing process of keeping a gender perspective in policy/ programme formulation, its implementation, and review". The pertinent

question arising here is, whether the States are taking steps diligently to put into operation the proposals and provisions recommended in gender budgeting? It is a matter to be seriously examined. There should be some kind of a monitoring system to oversee that administration does justice to the policies and priorities laid in gender budgeting, failing which the very purpose of gender budgeting will stand defeated.

5. Conclusion

Social development is an exquisite tapestry woven out of the multicolored yarns of attitude, aptitude and entrepreneurship of rural women. But lip service is not going to improve their living conditions. We needn't look for anything new, additional yojanas or projects or programmes for that matter. Educate and encourage women to avail themselves of the full range of the benefits of existing welfare measures. Simultaneously create self-awareness, rouse genuine interests and promote entrepreneurial abilities. Networking the activities will further help consolidate the ultimate gains. What is required is a professional mechanism which conceives an effective physical approach and an efficient psychological approach to see that the said agenda materializes into a reality. There are enough and riper apples in the basket right before us. We need only pick up those for our use.

Inquisitiveness and quest for freedom are the driving force which emancipates women from fear, insecurity and difficult life situations. It is the joint responsibility of the Government and social work agencies to see that such a goal is achieved. "Women are the real architects of society" - Harriet Beecher Stowe.

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