



KUDUMBASHREE: PRACTICAL LESSONS IN PSYCHOLOGICAL EMPOWERMENT

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Abstract

Empowerment is the result of an interaction between the individual and his environment. Empowerment can take many forms like social, economic, and psychological as discussed by different researchers. The changes taking place within an individual are generally referred to as psychological empowerment. This paper discusses the various approaches to understanding empowerment and argues that psychological empowerment is at the core of empowerment. Attempts at economic and social empowerment, also creates psychological empowerment almost as a by-product. The paper discusses this argument with reference to the Kudumbashree poverty eradication initiative .It discusses in detail how various aspects of the Kudumbashree are designed in such a way as to create psychological empowerment. It also reviews studies which indicate that this program has moved beyond the realm of social and economic empowerment and poverty eradication which were its primary objectives and contributed to the psychological empowerment of women involved in its activities. Hence it concludes that considering its impact on psychological empowerment such programs must be replicated.

Keywords: Empowerment, Psychological Empowerment, Kudumbashree.

INTRODUCTION

The word empowerment is related to power. Empowerment takes place due to an interaction between the individual and his environment. In the process the sense of the self as worthless changes into an acceptance of the self as an assertive citizen with sociopolitical ability. It involves both changes within the individual as well as outside. At the internal level there is an enhancement of the person's sense or belief in his or her ability to make decisions and to solve problems. At the external level change involves the ability to act and to implement the practical knowledge, the information, the skills, the capabilities and the other new resources acquired in the course of the process (Parsons, 1988).The changes taking place within an individual can be called psychological empowerment. This paper argues while psychological empowerment is at the core of empowerment, attempts at economic and social empowerment also creates psychological empowerment almost as a by-product. The paper discusses this argument with reference to the Kudumbashree poverty eradication initiative .Based on a review of research it shows how this program has contributed to the psychological empowerment of women involved in its activities.

UNDERSTANDING EMPOWERMENT

Rappaport (1987) defined empowerment as a process by which people, organizations, and communities gain mastery over issues which is of concern to them. According to Kabear (2001) empowerment is defined as follows "The expansion in people's ability to make strategic life choices in a context where this ability was previously denied to them." Empowerment is of different types and different researchers have given different frameworks to understand it.

In the context of women's empowerment the dimensions of empowerment are economic, social and cultural, legal, political and psychological (Malhotra and Schuler ,2005). Economic empowerment includes control and access to credit and increased household ownership of properties and assets. Social and cultural empowerment includes freedom of movement, lack of discrimination and freedom in decision making about personal matters as well as freedom from violence. Legal empowerment includes the knowledge of legal rights and mechanisms and familial support for exercising rights. Political empowerment includes the knowledge of political system and means of access to it. Psychological empowerment includes women increased self-esteem, self-efficacy and psychological well-being.

According to Chen (1997) empowerment includes material change, cognitive change, perceptual change and relational change. Material change includes increase in income, resources, basic needs and earning capacity. Cognitive change includes increase in knowledge, skills and awareness. Perceptual change includes change in self-esteem, self-confidence, vision for future, and visibility and respect. Relational change includes increased role in decision-making, bargaining power, participation in non-family activities and self-reliance.

Friedmann's(1992) proposed the alternative development and empowerment model. This model of empowerment involves local self-reliance, direct participatory democracy and experiential social learning. Friedmann's view was that empowerment cannot be conferred by external agents rather such agents can play a role in providing 'support in ways that encourage the disempowered to free themselves of traditional dependency' (Friedmann, 1992: 77). According to Friedmann (1992) people



in households potentially have access to three kinds of power: *social, political* and *psychological*. ‘Social power’ requires ‘access to certain “bases” of household production such as information, knowledge and skills, participation in social organisations, and financial resources’ (Friedmann, 1992: 33). The concept of ‘political power’ includes access to the process by which decisions are made, particularly those that affect people’s own future. It also includes the power to vote, as well as the power of voice and collective action (Friedmann, 1992: 33). Psychological power is defined by Friedmann as an individual sense of potency which is demonstrated in self-confident behaviour that often results from successful action in the social or political domains, although ‘it may also result from inter subjective work’ (Friedmann, 1992: 33). All three kinds of empowerment are seen by Friedmann form an interconnecting triad. Friedmann (1992: 116) suggests that ‘when this triad, centred on an individual woman and household, is linked up with others, the result is a social network of empowering relations that, because it is mutually reinforcing, has extraordinary potential for social change’. Friedmann’s framework of empowerment suggests that empowerment and social change is a multidimensional process which requires analysis at the micro and macro levels of the individual and the community, organization or group, and the interrelationships between them. This framework provides a useful basis to analyze the Kudumbashree a poverty eradication initiative undertaken by the government of Kerala.

KUDUMBASHREE: A BRIEF OVERVIEW

The Kudumbashree was launched by the government of Kerala on 17th May 1998. The literal meaning of the term in Malayalam is prosperity (shree) of family (Kudumbam) and fuses together the three elements of micro credit, entrepreneurship and empowerment to eradicate absolute poverty. It was a joint programme of the Government of Kerala and NABARD implemented through Community Development Societies (CDSs) of poor women, serving as the community wing of local governments. The primary aim was to eradicate absolute poverty. The grassroots of Kudumbashree are Neighbourhood Groups (NHG in short) that send representatives to the ward level Area Development Societies (ADS). The ADS sends its representatives to the Community Development Society (CDS), which completes the unique three-tier structure of Kudumbashree. Today, there are 2.58 lakhs NHGs, over 19,700 ADSs and 1072 CDSs in Kudumbashree.

Kudumbashree basically involves creation of self-help groups at the same time it is different from other such initiatives primarily because of two reasons. It is universal in its reach and spread driven by the local community of women. Today Kudumbashree is present in every village panchayat and municipality, and in nearly every ward, colony and hamlet. Secondly it links community involvement with local governance; each and every development initiative is implemented through Kudumbashree groups.

KUDUMBASHREE AND PSYCHOLOGICAL EMPOWERMENT

Kudumbashree is primarily aimed at poverty eradication so it definitely achieves economic empowerment. Since it is closely tied up with local self government bodies it also achieves significant political empowerment because it increases women’s participation in local governance. However what it has inadvertently done is it has enhanced psychological empowerment. This is because it’s very structure represents a practical application of techniques to create psychological empowerment.

Psychological empowerment is about self-esteem, self-efficacy and psychological well-being. Several researchers have identified self-confidence and self-esteem as essential ‘first steps’ to empowerment (Anderson, 1996; Claridge, 1996). Feelings of greater individual control are another important aspect of psychological empowerment (Anderson, 1996). The activities of Kudumbashree contribute in many ways towards enhancing all these parameters of psychological empowerment. Kudumbashree essentially works through self help groups and documented research indicates a positive impact of such groups. Hatzidimitriadou’s (2002) research shows that members of self-help groups feel more empowered through their roles within their groups. This empowerment works on an individual level but it also operates on a collective level with group members. Group members feel that they have some actual power over social change. Thus belonging to self-help groups will make people feel better on an individual basis and more socially included with more community power. Individual empowerment occurs through the process of personal development, which entails both the growth of skills and abilities and a more positive self-definition. Developing a sense of personal power can be effective in both enhancing mental health and enabling individuals to work toward broader social change (Zimmerman & Rappaport, 1988).

Personal efficacy lies at the heart of female empowerment. Efficacy is the degree to which an individual perceives that he or she controls his or her environment (Bandura, 1986). By learning through organizational group activities they gain control over their lives and their environment (Rogers, 1993). Women start believing in themselves that they are capable of doing business on their own and making decision and choices for their businesses and families. A study by Hunt and Kasynathan (2001) found that what women valued the most about being members in the credit groups are the confidence, knowledge, or training that they have gained. Some of the women stated that they felt that they could take action against wrong doing after



they became members of credit groups (Hunt & Kasynathan, 2001). This indicates that participating in microfinance services increases the women's self-esteem and self-efficacy which lead to more active role in decision making both within the household and within the community.

Self-efficacy reflects itself in a women's articulacy and confidence in speaking with outsiders, people of authority, children's teachers and her service provider, her confidence in her ability to disagree with her husband and other family members, and her belief that she is effective in solving family problems (Schuler et al., 2010).

Rappaport (1993) asserted that self-help groups, which offer the venue for, shared experience; emotional support and social learning, could help constitute a social identity. There is totally new psychological redefinition of self. The "helper therapy principle" postulated by Riessman (1965) pointed to the process by which helping others has a therapeutic effect on the helper, and the self-help group provides the context for members to gain the unique benefits that may arise from helping someone who has the same problem as the helper. Kudumbashree fulfills this condition too because self-help groups consist of individuals with more or less similar backgrounds helping each other. Hashemi et al. (1996) found that credit programs increase women's mobility within their villages by requiring that they attend weekly meetings. They also create opportunities for women to travel outside of their villages, by requiring some visits to the local program office, and through occasional training programs. This is also applicable to Kudumbashree.

Further most of the activities of Kudumbashree are related to generating meaningful employment for community members. Research in psychology indicates that being engaged in decent work in itself promotes psychosocial empowerment by developing a sense of ownership, optimism, and efficacy or confidence in one's ability to be effective. A number of activities encourage and provide opportunities for expanding and strengthening capacity-building community networks through which information about entrepreneurial and social opportunities can be shared. Psychological research has demonstrated that group cohesion can be developed by a diverse group coming together on an equal basis and a shared purpose, and working interdependently to achieve a larger, common goal.

Research on impact of Kudumbashree indicates positive outcomes with reference to psychological empowerment. It is evident that Kudumbashree helped women to understand and realize their unique potential, develop courage to think and act independently, express what they desire, suffer, feel, speak out and express freely, and explore their distinct growth and development. By helping women meet their practical needs and increase in their efficacy in their traditional roles, Neighbour Hood Groups (NHG's) can help women to gain respect and achieve more in their traditional roles, which in turn can lead to increased esteem and self-confidence. Research by Venugopalan (2014) indicates that personal skills acquired by members after joining in Kudumbashree shows an increase. Respondents showed an increase with reference to the ability to face difficulties and to negotiate and bargain. They also showed improvement in ability to participate in Parent's Teachers Association of schools/ Colleges, face personal and official problems as well as ability to speak and speak out. They also showed a great improvement in decision making powers in household affairs, education of children, purchase of household articles and in matters relating to themselves. Kudumbashree members reported higher levels of self-efficacy, while they showed lower levels of self-derogation. By analyzing these factors researchers found that Kudumbashree members achieved a state of psychological empowerment to some extent. (Rajesh & Sylaja, 2013)

CONCLUSION

Thus we may conclude that Kudumbashree has moved beyond poverty eradication into the realm of empowerment specifically psychological empowerment. This was not the mission of the program however it is indeed one of its greatest achievements because achieving psychological empowerment is not easy. Thus Kudumbashree model is worth replicating not merely from the view point of socio-economic development of a community but also psychological growth and well-being.

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