



WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN THE PROMOTION OF COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT IN INDIA: A VIEW

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Abstract

The rising tide of democratization has brought new opportunities for women to participate in different public roles at all levels. In personal lives and in the public sphere women's as members of organizations and political parties are organizing for change. Involving women at all levels of development processes—thinking, planning and implementation—makes difference to the world. To bring women to the center stage, however, requires profound changes in the socialization process that reproduces gender relations, as well as dismantling century's old structures of thought and practice. Such changes will take time. However, over the past few decades it has become clear that women are a tremendous social resource that no society can afford to undervalue or under use. Women will no longer accept being treated as workhorses for development strategies planned by others; they are demanding to be treated as partners. Planners have a great responsibility, both to listen to women and to build their vision into gender-sensitive social policies and strategies. Therefore, this paper views on women's participation in the promotion of social development.

1.1 Introduction

Women's participation in the development process has been recognized not only as an issue of human rights and social justice, but also as a crucial contribution to solving the pressing needs of important and often-excluded segments of society. Solutions to women's basic and strategic needs are part of the development process and effective, sustainable solutions require participation by the women likely to be affected by those solutions. Furthermore, evidence shows that women's participation in social development initiatives¹, in policymaking and in development decisions generates benefits that affect not only women and their communities, but also society as a whole.

Today, more than ever, women are becoming active participants and full protagonists of the development process. However, many obstacles and barriers continue to complicate women's participation. In many parts of the world, large numbers of women remain isolated, unorganized, and poor and constrained by socio-cultural and legal structures that restrict their access to, and involvement in, the development process. The obstacles and barriers that limit women's opportunity to participate in different aspects of community life and social development are markedly diverse. Public policy initiatives to overcome barriers to women participating equally in economic, social and political activity vary greatly among countries and over time.

Of course, the role of women in development must be analyzed and understood within the historical, cultural, social and political contexts of each nation and region. History, tradition, technology, demography and urbanization, among other factors, have influenced the role of women and their opportunities and experiences in the development process. Accordingly, it is likely that much can be learned by analyzing the contexts in which women's participation in social development has evolved and by reflecting on how different initiatives have facilitated opportunities for women to participate in economic, social and political dimensions of that development.

1.2 Women and Social Development

“Social development” refers to a multidimensional, dynamic process that leads to sustainable improvements in the well being of individuals, families, communities and society as whole, in a context of justice and equity. It is a process that seeks to reduce poverty and inequality, promote mature and full citizenship for all and strengthen democracy. As such, it depends on economic growth, improved competitiveness in the globalized economy, environmental sustainability, sustainable improvements in living conditions, and the development of human and social capital, in a strategy driven by economic objectives as well as ethical commitments to past, current and future generations. In general, advances in social development and gender equality place women in a better position than they have had in the past, to face the challenge of greater participation in economic and political activity.

Women's full participation is paramount if equal and successful development is to take place. Full participation constitutes part of what we might understand as “development” in a democratic and just society. Accordingly, we might develop our entire analysis on the understanding of participation as an end in itself. However, since women not only act as agents of social change but are a sustainable factor in this change, it stands to reason that when women are marginalized, national development goals are hampered. In other words, we might also consider women's participation to be a motor for development; obstacles to that participation limit the process of development.



Although women have a long history of organizing to confront economic and social crises, only in recent years has their participation in social development received special attention. Today, public policy is changing as women are mobilizing to enhance their community's development. World leaders, gathered in 2000 at the United Nations' Millennium Summit prioritized a set of values to guide global development in the new century: freedom, equality, solidarity, tolerance, respect for nature and shared responsibility. The call for equality evidently reinforces the promotion of women's participation in development processes. The call for solidarity and shared responsibility invites us (as citizens, advocates and policymakers) to facilitate opportunities for all citizens to act in the effort to promote equitable and sustainable development. Strategies to educate, inform and empower women are among the means used to facilitate these opportunities.

1.3 Women's Participation in the Promotion of Social Development

Participation of women and women's organizations in social development in three specific contexts: community development, including the satisfaction of basic human needs, the search for solutions to women's basic and strategic needs, and the search for income-generating opportunities; public policy dialogues and decision making; and formal political leadership roles. Women's contributions to community development, as well as experiences that have sought to facilitate or enrich women's roles in the promotion of social development, in order to highlight lessons that can be learned by each region. These experiences may shed some light on possible alternative interventions to empower women and women's organizations to effectively participate in development initiatives, policy dialogues and decision-making. Cultural and religious acceptance of a subservient role of women exacerbates the impediments to women's participation. Women have become "inherently" different from men, as they assume all household responsibilities, work in a different ("more private") economy and are "relegated to a different socio-cultural status. Accordingly, inequality persists in the gender distribution of roles and responsibilities in the promotion of development.

Diverse development strategies may have brought about particular characteristics of the way tasks are distributed within families, communities and nations, and this can help explain the differences in women's participation in the economic and political life of different countries. The workshop participants contemplated the notion that an economic growth strategy based on labor-intensive "light" industries, such as textiles or apparel, depended critically on female labor participation. In countries that pursued growth based on those industries, government policy may have proactively facilitated strategies to encourage a redistribution of roles such as child care, which had traditionally been the responsibility of women in the home. Further research on this point may shed light on a possible relationship between growth strategies based on industries dominated by female labor and public policy initiatives to facilitate redistribution of household tasks to facilitate women's participation in the labor force.

Women's organizations have emerged as basic social actors that promote more equitable participation in all spheres of society and provide effective links among women, and between women and governments and women and other social actors. They have emerged through women's own efforts: poor women who organize grassroots organizations to satisfy their own needs, as well as professional women who organize to facilitate the organization and empowerment of marginalized or low-income women. They have also emerged as the result of public policy, development NGOs, international development agencies and international feminist movements. Recently, governments in both regions have supported or worked with women's organizations, providing them further sustainability. Governments frequently treat women in their role as mothers and focus a good part of their interventions with women's organizations on the promotion of children's development. Crisis and societal concerns may provide key opportunities to create greater social awareness of women's issues different from those related to their children and to facilitate women's participation in public spheres. For example, the recognition of increases in poverty rates among households with a single female breadwinner has been used to advocate for restructuring of social services and social assistance to accommodate the needs of poor working women with pre-school-aged children. Another example has emerged with the growing concern with the decline in population.

1.4 Women's Mobilization for Community Development

Women all over the world have organized to promote solutions to their communities' needs. Shared needs appear to motivate and mobilize women's organizations. The workshop examined five experiences in which women and women's organizations were making proactive and deliberate efforts to promote the development and progress of low-income communities. Experiences of this nature allow us to explore questions such as:

- Under what conditions do women come together to mobilize resources for the development of their community?
- What strategies do they choose and why?
- How has development been enhanced?
- Under what conditions do women and women's organizations mobilize based on their gender identity?



- What issues are addressed?
- Does women's involvement in community development empower and enable women to become active participants in the policy-making process?
- How are women addressing the issue of compatibility of their multiple roles—as mothers, as wives, as community development leaders, as entrepreneurs, etc.?
- How is this affecting women's participation in community development initiatives?

Women often organize themselves in response to critical situations in their own communities. This response may mean that women project into the public sphere their traditional care giving roles. Indeed, these initiatives have effectively contributed to the quality of life in poor communities, with tangible improvements in nutrition, well-child care, registration and statistics on births, deaths, and marriage, and the delivery of services to the disabled, senior citizens and victims of violence. Additionally, their efforts create by-products that may be equally or even more valuable: social capital, community identity or cohesion, empowerment of women and their awareness of their rights. Other experiences of women's organization to promote community development have emerged from proactive measures taken by professional women in solidarity with other women with specific needs. In essence, initiatives of this nature feature women working to empower and educate other women, as well as to raise social awareness of the inequalities that disproportionately affect low-income and rural women and those belonging to ethnic or racial minorities. The results of these efforts build on changes experienced by empowered women (as individuals), who can then adopt community leadership roles and eventually influence public policies and social awareness.

1.5 Conclusion

Finally, women have also been mobilized to participate in community development by NGOs, feminist organizations, the church or religious organizations or governmental agencies. Effective mobilization should lead to a sustainable, autonomous process in which the women of a community continue to organize themselves for planning and action. However, women's organizations can come to depend on the assist entails framework of actors such as government agencies, which inhibit the autonomy, entrepreneurship and self-sustainability of those organizations. Women's participation in effective responses to community issues creates opportunities for empowerment of women and their integration into public activity. Experiences in women's participation in the promotion of community development suggest that women's organization facilitates improvements in the welfare of the community, as well as changes in women's sense of worth and contribution, their motivation and empowerment. The value of these experiences must be judged by their contribution to better living conditions for women, men and children, to the emotional well-being of women, to the stock of social capital in our communities, to women's leadership and to the empowerment of grassroots women's organization. As well, they can be analyzed in terms of their effects on the attitudes, perceptions and traditions that perpetuate gender inequalities in society.

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