Chapter VI - Lessons from Below: Rethinking Women’s Empowerment

This research began with engagement with two central questions about how thinking and practices around women’s empowerment are being operationalized by various mediating organizations (both Government and Non-Government) across different contexts in Andhra Pradesh and to what extent were these strategies (empowering) creating democratic spaces for catalyzing women’s citizenship rights?

The focus of this research has been on an extremely selective range of strategies for empowering women in Andhra Pradesh. But the observations and analysis from all the four case studies researched here provides a useful context for critically reexamining the relationship between organizational ideologies and strategies for empowering women, the strengths and limitations of the various strategies. More importantly, findings from this research enables a deeper reflection on how these ideas and strategies are contributing to the broader discourses of women’s grass roots politics and empowerment, social justice and questions of development. Women’s experiences in various types of collectives like the SHGs, Mahila Sangha’s, DWCRA groups or Thrift and Credit cooperatives discussed here are both diverse and context-specific, while offering the possibility of some critical generalizations from the field. The case studies researched here also point to several important lessons, challenges and emerging questions in relation to the democratizing potential of various strategies and well as for catalyzing citizenship rights of women. Some of the key conclusions can be summarized as follows.

1. Re-thinking Organizational Ideologies and Strategies for Empowering Women

Experience across all the case studies here shows that the ideology of the facilitating/supporting organization (NGO, Government or Quasi-Government) is a significant factor in determining the nature of empowerment processes and extent of outcomes for women, in any given context.
The MS programme is based on the ideology that education is a critical dimension to empowering women and a means for countering powerlessness. In this process, organization of women into sanghas was seen as a major strategy to enable women to plan, implement and direct their own empowerment. The programme began in an open-ended, flexible manner, aimed at bringing women together around their own self-defined concerns. Strategies within the programme, especially during the early phase also evolved largely in response to women’s needs and demands during the process of organizing them into sanghas. The quality of empowerment outcomes, especially for women belonging to dalit communities, who are an important part of this process has been marked in terms of spaces for self-reflection, learning, knowledge and analysis centered on their own lives and their surrounding conditions leading to negotiations with structures of power at various levels. The rapid upscale of the MS programme in the later phases combined with the pressures of new collaborations with various other programmes has prevented a more sustained and meaningful engagement with questions of caste and gender and structural analysis in a more rigorous manner within the MS Sanghas.

The government initiated DWCRA programme also had an explicitly stated political goal of changing women’s status in society and their quality of life. While large-scale social mobilization of women was made possible during the early phase of this programme, the later shift to the SHG approach and rapid scale up led to the programme becoming target oriented with the more broader social and political goals being narrowed down to economic dimensions of thrift and savings, driven from outside. The REEDS experience with promoting SHG groups for empowering women clearly shows that where the ideology of women’s empowerment has been tagged on to the larger goal of poverty alleviation, the political potential and goals of both poverty alleviation and women’s empowerment has been reduced to a more efficiency driven model of enabling women to become merely effective economic agents, while sidestepping other large structural issues impinging on their lives. Women’s experiences in the CDF promoted thrift and credit cooperatives again reflect this aspect clearly. The underlying assumption here is that a timely dose or allocation of credit to the poor women will turn them into entrepreneurs
who can help themselves out of poverty. This approach leaves the larger systemic inequalities that lead to poverty itself largely unchallenged and unaddressed.

2. Tensions in Project vs. Process-based Approaches to Empowering Women

What these case studies here also bring out is the dynamics and tensions between the process-oriented and project-based approaches to empowering women. Theoretically, while all the organizations discussed here endorse a process-based approach to empowering women that underpins their work, a wide gap appears to separate this processual understanding of empowerment from the more projectised approaches and strategies adopted in practice. While most of these programmes began with a process-oriented approach during their initial phase, there has been a gradual shift to more sectoral, project-based interventions over time. The reasons for this shift have been mainly because of scale up through collaborations and partnerships with other donor-funded and large government programmes like watershed management, land development etc as in the case of MS or the savings and credit based approaches as in the case of SHGs in REEDS which brought in the compulsions of pace, systems and targets. A closer look at all the programmes here shows the gradual shift from intensive processes of building women’s consciousness and awareness about their lives, rights and their leadership through the collectives to rapid physical expansion over time, aided through introduction of several sectoral projects on health, education, micro-credit, natural resource management etc with no meaningful linkages on ground. In the process then, women’s experiences in various collectives show that the artificial boundaries of these sectoral, project-based approaches have been constantly challenged in the face of their inability and inadequacy in responding to the changing contexts and needs of women.

3. The Need for Redefining Women’s Practical and Strategic Gender Needs

Closely related to the earlier observation, findings from the study also compel a need for redefining categories like practical and strategic gender needs in the process of empowering women. A set of observations that come up for reflection here are in relation
to the manner in which various approaches discussed here understand women’s disempowerment and position them within their programmes as well as the manner in which they identify women’s needs and concerns and create conditions for addressing the same. In both the CDF promoted women’s thrift cooperatives and the SHGs initiated by REEDS, women’s disempowerment is seen as stemming largely from their lack of economic opportunities and access to capital. Interventions designed to address women’s needs have therefore been predominantly economic in nature in the form of savings, credit and access to bank linkages, with all other needs being subsumed or dominated by the economic agenda. Women have been positioned as needy clients and not as competent, but socially constrained actors in their own right who can define and prioritize their own needs and interests. In the government supported DWCRA programme also, while there is a broader understanding of empowerment, the pressures of time frame and targets has seen this programme being largely confined to basic needs like provision of savings and credit. In all these interventions, the major focus around organizing women has been to facilitate thrift and improved access to credit as a basic need, without adequate thinking on investment options and avenues for bettering women’s economic conditions or livelihood requirements. There has been no explicit concern with power or with structural inequalities in various forms that impinges on women participating as effective economic agents.

The MS programme began by consciously moving away from thrift and credit and focusing more on educational processes centered around learning, reflection and supporting women to act on their needs and concerns. However, the need for addressing women’s livelihood and economic concerns while retaining the focus on conscientisation processes has meant major challenges for the programme. Inadequate focus on livelihood related issues within the programme has also compelled women to seek memberships in other groups promoted under the government Velugu programme.

What emerges from field experiences is that women’s practical and strategic gender needs are not two separate and dichotomous categories but actually linked through the transformatory potential of various strategies used for empowerment. This potential lies in
the extent to which different strategies seek to open up rather than foreclose possibilities
open to women. The operationalisation of this transformatory potential depends on the
extent to which project and programmatic interventions of different agencies are organized
around genuinely participatory modes of needs identification and prioritization rather than
imposition of their own priorities. What emerges from more innovative programmes like
the MS is that where a space has been created for women’s own voices to be heard, either
through participatory processes of need identification or by organizational practices that
encourage women’s participation in shaping agenda’s, a range of interconnected needs,
which are both practical and strategic in nature come into view.

4. Citizenship Spaces and Membership Spaces: Rethinking the Idea of the Collective

Perhaps the most significant and recurring question that this research throws up and
addresses is the extent to which the various forms of women’s collectives discussed here
are membership spaces or spaces for catalyzing women’s citizenship rights. This
membership-citizenship question manifests itself in different forms in various experiences
across all the four cases researched here and has again important implications for the
broader discourse on empowerment.

Women’s experience in all the organizations discussed here challenges the ideological
framework that underpins the idea of women’s participation in these collectives as
members, needy clients or stakeholders in various development programmes promoted by
the mediating organizations which are aimed at empowering them. What emerges in the
analysis is that even while projects targeting women’s participation (which is often seen as
a means) and an indicator of empowerment by many of the supporting agencies, have
narrow practical ends, women participate in these for a range of their own political reasons
and in the process also weave in and build their own strategic interests and needs as active
agents and citizens into this process. Examples of women bargaining for higher wages in
agriculture or raising the issue of land entitlement as in the case of the Sanghas in the MS
project or their aspirations for political leadership in the CDF promoted cooperatives can
all be seen as ways in which agenda defined from outside is actually used by groups of
women, who are seeking to push their own interests from within. It is this fact that largely explains the enduring presence of women in large numbers either in SHGs or through their multiple memberships in various groups through which they are seeking to address their needs. Several experiences analyzed here reveal that in many situations, women have defined their own agenda following the internal dynamic of their own organizational strength and have in the process challenged the mediating organizations that have been unable to support or sustain the above demands raised by women.

At a second level, this research brings to bear through various examples the manner in which the organizations involved in facilitating empowerment seek to make a ‘responsible’ or good stakeholder of the women through imposition of ideas of group norms, rules, modes of behavior and participation etc aimed at governing the collectives. Attempts to discipline women’s collectives are also evident in experiences of selectively bestowing awards and rewards in case of well-performing or behaved groups who conform to project norms and defined rules and imposition of sanctions and penalties in cases of non-performance or non-conformity with group norms. These clearly illustrate the ways in which the women are sought to be molded as stakeholders and members.

Various experiences and examples in this research highlight women’s constant mediation between their stakeholder identity and as citizens attempting to exert their rights and demand accountability either from the NGO’s or State agencies working with them by challenging organizational norms and project imposed modes of behavior. As experiences in the previous section clearly highlight, it is in the process of negotiating their rights through demands for equal wages, for land rights, participation in political processes, struggle to fight caste and gender discriminatory practices or by resisting norms and rules such as using group loans for their own defined priorities, defaulting loan repayment, non-attendance in meetings, political participation etc that a range of agential actions are demonstrated by the women.

At a related level, these experiences also compel a reexamination of the grass roots women’s organizations as collective or cohesive spaces where women are assumed to
pursue mutually benefitting, commonly agreed interests most of the times. What emerges from various accounts in this research are redefined notions of these collectives as contested spaces where sometimes common and sometimes conflicting and divergent interests are negotiated amongst various groups of women. Experiences emerging from this study indicate that the dynamics thrown up in the process of women negotiating their common or multiple interests from varied locations of caste, class and gender either as stakeholders or as citizens exerting their rights that the collectives become the site for struggle and change in the long run. Attempts by the women in sanghas, SHGs, CDF Cooperatives or DWCRA groups to challenge patterns of dominance and negotiate with power structures at various levels indicate that women’s membership in these collectives has enabled them to catalyze citizenship rights to some extent. In some instances, these have also occurred independent of any facilitation or external support. However, the fuller consolidation and realization of these citizenship questions has been largely blunted, given the limits of the multiple, sectoral projects pursued by the facilitating organizations, with accompanying pressures of delivery targets and time frames thereby preventing these organizations working with women from engagement with more structural issues that impinge on women’s lives in a sustained manner.

5. New challenges and Questions for Measuring Empowerment

While the objective of this research was clearly not to measure women’s empowerment in any pre-determined framework, women’s experiences across all the empowerment approaches discussed here nevertheless challenge several simplistic assumptions in relation to ideas and action around empowering rural women in heterogeneous contexts. The complexity and range of women’s experiences escapes being caught or measured in any neat, prescriptive categories and in fact challenges attempts at quantification and measurement that accompany most of the current studies on empowerment, that are aimed at directing development policy and practice. While a sizable part of current literature and discourse generated largely through impact evaluations appear as “success stories” from ground, strewn with numbers and indicators of achievement, the attempt here has been at generating a more qualitative understanding of the rather “messy” and complex dynamics
and negotiations that are intrinsic to the process of thinking and practice of empowerment approaches. The individual and collective articulation of women’s experiences across diverse contexts discussed here are not merely anecdotal narratives but an attempt to provide insights into changes within women’s lives and the contexts they live in. Research findings here also highlight the fact that any empowerment process initiated from outside (albeit all its limitations and strengths) could often have the most unintended and actually contradictory outcomes, thereby posing important challenges for measurement at various levels.

This research compels our attention to the open-ended nature of the empowerment process, which is premised on the unpredictability of women’s agency and the diversity of contexts and circumstances under which such agential actions are exercised, showing the possibility for change. Women’s experiences as active “agents” of empowerment also raises important questions and observations about how one might begin to engage with the idea of the collective and questions of justice and social justice in the current development context where these terms appear to be increasingly depoliticized. Findings from this study compel a re-examination of mainstream indicators and accounts for measuring women’s empowerment such as high repayment rates, isolated examples of successful micro-enterprises by women, high levels of women’s participation in meetings, various development programmes, heroic struggles for basic amenities in the village etc. In a context where increasingly multiple programmes and donors persist on generating ‘evidence of empowerment’ through reports and statistics which are leading to homogenization of processes, strategies and outcomes on ground, the findings here necessitate a need for engaging with women’s encounters with poverty, monsoon and crop failure, caste discrimination, gender based violence and their everyday struggles for livelihood as part of their their larger dream and vision for a better life for themselves and their children. This research also compels us to engage with new analytical categories of women’s negotiations through various forms of organizations as active members and rights-seeking citizens, their negotiation through the system of awards and penalties to account for a more complex and nuanced understanding of how empowerment processes and outcomes are shaped on ground. This research also draws our attention to the
shortcomings of the mediating organizations in inuring the empowerment process from the larger socio-economic and political realities of the village and the macro contexts in which empowerment strategies are actually mediated. Women’s experiences in the various cases analyzed here draw our attention to the ways in which the shifts in caste, class and other configurations in the village impact women’s collectives in the process shaping not only their own consciousness of their social status and power but also the different ways in which their village and different groups of people in the village are centered or marginalized with respect to resources and various rural development programmes.

Theoretically, the empowerment approach goes beyond other approaches to demand structural changes at the fundamental level in many ways. The experiences of REEDS, CDF and the DWCRA programme discussed here indicate that in practice, their thinking and practice are caught in the WID approach to a large extent. While the interventions have succeeded in creating a large public presence of women in numbers and providing some economic benefits, there has been very limited engagement with any other aspect of women’s lives. Women’s negotiations with their empowerment process through the SHGs, DWCRA groups and cooperatives are compelling the facilitating NGO’s and agencies to reexamine their own ideas and strategies around empowerment. In this context, the lack exposure to alternative ways of addressing women’s concerns appears to be a critical issue. On the other hand, findings here indicate that the MS programme which is committed to the agenda education as a means for empowering women also faces a huge challenge in sustaining the empowerment processes initiated, in the face of introduction of large, externally funded World Bank programmes like Velugu or IKP. The case studies analyzed in this research point to the critical need for linking a range of issues impinging on different aspects of women’s lives in the process of working towards their empowerment while underlining the need for a clear sense of ideology, direction and strategy to achieve gender – specific goals. Women’s experiences across all the four case studies here indicate that achieving gender specific goals must include increasing women’s rights over land and other resources, expanding opportunities for political participation and leadership, enhancing their awareness around rights in order to enable them to assert their rights and challenge power structures at various levels including the
State and the mediating NGOs who are working with the women’s groups. Experiences from this research show a clear gap separating thinking and practice related to achieving the above to a large extent. Research findings also show that the women as part of these collectives are attempting to both negotiate with and redefine the parameters of donor-funded empowerment programmes that focus narrowly on timescales and targets without addressing the realities of women’s lives or larger structural issues. The research findings strongly indicate the need for taking the current level of discourse on women’s empowerment from the narrow projectised and often commercial framework to a more meaningful political framework embedded in values of social justice, citizenship rights and equity.

This micro-research will also hopefully help in a more critical reassessment of thinking, practices and methods for understanding empowerment by focusing more on the qualitative changes in women’s lives that very often escape the quantitative benchmarks currently in use and in the process also help redirect thinking, policy and practice around women’s empowerment.

**Areas and Questions for Further Research**

The primary focus of this research has been on micro level processes at the field level, particularly around village-level women’s collectives as key sites for understanding different ideas and practices for empowering women. While the focus of this research has been on an extremely selective range of strategies for empowering women, a full discussion on the nature of emerging challenges and further questions has not been possible. The findings here though clearly point to the need for further research at various levels.

Firstly, the electoral outcome of the State assembly elections in Andhra Pradesh held in 2004 and 2009 decided the exit of the TDP, which was largely seen as the champion of women’s empowerment and leading the SHG movement not just within the State but also in the country. That the same women SHG’s in rural areas earlier seen as the “vote bank”
of the TDP Government played a key role in delivering shifting electoral verdicts cannot be ignored. While the reasons for the electoral defeat of TDP are many, women’s experiences from this research indicate their disillusionment with several of the reform led policies initiated by the TDP government as part of the liberalization agenda. Reforms initiated by the government especially in relation to the farm sector such as hike in power prices, withdrawal of subsidies and other support system to agriculture had adverse consequences for a large number of marginal and small farmers leading to high input costs and indebtedness amongst farmers. Various studies and media reports also indicate that the above period (1996-2004) witnessed the highest number of suicides by farmers as a direct consequence of the above policies, especially in districts like Mahbubnagar. The role of women in delivering the electoral verdict is significant since it is the women in several of the farming households who were contributing to the household incomes by managing the farms and supplementing the earnings through wage labor, especially in cases where men were migrating out of the village. It is apparent from women’s experiences discussed here that the benefits that they had received through populist government measures like micro-credit, bank linkage, subsidized cooking gas etc through the SHGs are very minimal and inadequate as compared to the larger issues such as crop failure, food security, unemployment etc confronting them on an everyday basis. At a broader level, the findings from this research reveal that sectoral interventions by the government aimed at women such as micro-credit, health, watershed, land development etc are inadequate without affecting more structural changes such as land entitlements, expanding political participation, protection against caste and gender discrimination and atrocities etc. The shifting nature of the electoral verdict also leads one to questions like “to what extent can these large scale organization of women into SHGs in Andhra Pradesh be used as new platforms for socio-political mobilization against State policies and reforms?” This research also hints at the possibility of a larger political process taking shape within organized women’s groups which also needs to be researched further.

To a large extent, the Congress party in power for the last 6 years also appears to be pursuing the same reform agenda and policies for women initiated by the TDP party in the earlier phase, albeit projected in a ‘welfare mode’ through programmes such as ‘Paavala
Vaddi’, ‘Indiramma Housing Scheme’, the ‘National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme’, (NREGS) etc. At a related level, there is also the need for critically examining the role of NGOs as change agents in empowering women in terms of the strengths and limitations of their micro-level interventions, particularly in a context where large scale World Bank and bilaterally supported programmes like Indira Kanthi Patham as well as commercial Micro-Finance Organisations, Banks and Multi-national Corporations have entered the rural market to tap what they see as a vast “social Capital” in the form of the women SHGs. In the context of increasing proliferation of MFIs, banks, insurance companies and Multi-national Corporations like the HLL who are all keen to do ‘business with women’, it is equally important to ask whether the SHGs are adequately equipped and empowered to negotiate or deal with these new range of actors. To what extent will the women’s groups subvert these processes to pursue their own agenda and prevent becoming vulnerable to patronage politics of major political parties remains to be seen.

This research also indicates the ways in which the content and meaning of empowerment in mainstream development has shifted the discourse from its older framework of social justice, equity and rights to a more commercial framework defined by the mechanics of savings, credit, loans and repayment regimens through creation of SHGs and a array of other user groups such as Water Users Associations (WUAs), Vana Samrakshana Samitis (VSS) etc all over the State. This raises wider questions about the increasing importance of micro credit as a strategy for poverty reduction and empowerment of women and its link to the advancement of global capitalism to rural areas which needs to be explored further. Of equal concern is the manner in which the idea of self help is being increasingly used to mean self-provisioning of services thereby placing greater burden on women’s unpaid time and labor, in a context where the State is abdicating its responsibilities from key sectors and shifting these responsibilities to organizations of rural women. Is the creation of a large number of SHGs actually a second wave of de-centralization and governance as projected needs further probing? Equally important is the need for understanding the implications of the shifting discourse on empowerment, poverty and questions of social justice emanating from these changes, emphasizing the need for focusing further research at various levels.