

Role of Self Help Groups in Achieving Gender Equity at Grassroots Communities in Rural Odisha

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Abstract

Women's participation in socio-economic and political activities in India has been historically underwhelming, attributed to their unequal status and the constraints of India's patriarchal society. Their socio-economic and political presence has yet to catch up with that of other developing nations. The government has made policy frameworks that help emancipate women's status through economic empowerment and political participation. One such policy provision is the Self Help Group (SHG) which grants sanctions to women to form groups for income-generating activities. This article attempts to understand the impact of SHG on women and society to gain gender equity in grassroots communities in Odisha.

Participation of Women in the socio-economic and political domain in India

India's women workforce is one of the lowest in the world, as per a survey conducted in 2022 by the International Labour Organization (ILO). According to the report, India ranks 143rd out of 146 countries, as only 19% of women are in the workforce. This is despite women comprising 47% of our total population. The context of 'women workforce' has been referred to females who are 15 years old, working, or actively looking for a job.

India ranks 107th (out of 146) under the parameter of 'education attainment of women,' and the literacy rate for women in India is 70.3%. Despite education being made freely available to women, many factors continue to obstruct their participation in paid employment in both urban and rural scenarios. This includes their expressed preference for paid jobs, socioeconomic factors, and social norms.

The 73rd amendment to the Indian constitution was passed in 1992, empowering state governments to form 'Gram Panchayat' (Village Council Body governing rights on village matters). Here one-third of the seats were reserved for women. The 80s saw a rapid growth of programs aimed toward achieving women's empowerment and gender equity. Most of these schemes dealt with women and child issues like nutrition, legal protection, and empowerment through livelihood under the Ministry of Human Resource Development (1985). The Ministry of Women and Child Development was formed on 30th Jan 2006.

Introduction to Self Help Group (SHG)

Bangladesh's Gramin Bank success inspired developing nations worldwide to adopt the microfinance and micro-lending model through SHG schemes. The model proved effective in countries where marginalized communities were excluded from the formal financial and credit system. The micro-credit banking focussed on the emancipation of women and their access to credit at low-interest rates, allowing them to engage in activities that would help them generate profit. The concept of SHGs was formed and went into action in India (circa 1992) to promote self-employment in rural areas. The program was designed to counter the challenges faced by the women workforce, giving them greater control and decision-making ability for their work. Under the scheme, the SHGs were provided with funds along with providing them with training and skill to be able to conduct their micro-enterprises.

Self Help Groups typically consist of 12-14 members of women with homogeneous socio-economic backgrounds, forming a group with the help of government agencies, private agencies, and Not for Profit (NGOs) for economic gain, fostering the spirit of helping each other to generate income. This model has been adopted in different parts of the world where nations have tried to counter poverty and gender inequality.

So far, 78,57,033 SHGs have been formed in India since the scheme's inception. 90% of these SHGs consist solely of women. State governments in India have the authority to design their respective modules to ensure that the benefit of these schemes is availed for the purpose intended.

The impact of SHGs has gone beyond facilitating income generation for women, and the transformation can be observed in the overall rural population. A culture of entrepreneurship (Small and Medium Enterprises) has emerged. It has fostered a sense of community among the SHG group members, building a solid network of financially empowered women.

There have been many studies on SHG schemes exploring their implementation, effectiveness, success, and non-performance, along with evidence to quantify each factor. However, besides the measure of success and failure of these schemes, the SHGs have notably also created spaces and scope of inclusion and participation for women in socio-economic and political spaces in their communities. The social impact of the system on women's empowerment has been far-reaching.

In the Context of Odisha

In Odisha, the percentage of the rural population is above 83%, with an almost equal female-to-male ratio (49:50). A large part of Odisha's rural and agrarian society comprises Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (SC/ST). These communities are deemed marginalized, lacking socio-economic empowerment as a whole. Their societal structures are patriarchal and based on age-old norms where the participation of women working outside their families is not encouraged.

Agriculture remains the primary source of livelihood in rural Odisha (63% dependency). Women regularly work as agricultural labourers, caring for their families and other chores. Despite their high involvement in agricultural work, their remuneration is lesser than their male counterparts and has not been considered lucrative employment. Other than this, the nature of the agricultural sector can be categorized as 'unorganized,' lacking regulatory structure or legal framework, leaving women exploited and disadvantaged.

The Government of Odisha introduced 'Mission Shakti' (SHG initiative for women) in 2001, and according to their official website, the initiative has positively impacted 70,00,000 beneficiaries. The state government incorporated the issue of women's empowerment at the governance level right after the 73 amendments (constitution) by making 50% reservation for women at the Panchayati Raj and one-third of seats reserved for SC/ST women.

Odisha's 'Mission Shakti' has been termed the 'Silent Revolution,' transforming women's lives. In 2017, a separate directorate board was established to bring all activities under one umbrella. To strengthen the SHG initiatives, micro-credit support, seed fund, financial assistance to Block Level Federations, and drudgery reduction support are provided by the board.

Government Initiative to Achieve Gender Equity in Odisha

Socio-economic Impact

In the context of Odisha, women's empowerment has been reflected in the Panchayati Raj system, large-scale educational and employment opportunities, women watch bodies, empathetic legal and parliamentary system, women cells, Independent Ministries, and Commissions. The availability of Dialogue and Remedial mechanisms. Together, these have proved vital for women's empowerment. Besides establishing a formal administration structure, the state regularly organizes trade and cultural fairs to strengthen the community.

The Government of Odisha has used these groups to disseminate information effectively. The members of SHG groups are observed to be aware of social issues, government policies, and schemes that can improve their conditions. The strategy to merge SHGs activities with women by creating rights awareness and entitlement go beyond the socio-economic upliftment of poor rural women from grassroots communities. Investing in skill development training and income-generating activities has boosted their confidence and abilities leading to their active participation in community decision-making and Gram Sabhas (village-level decision-making).

Through the formation of these SHGs, there have been shifts in social dynamics for women that have led to a change in the gendered roles at the household level. The finance provided to them through the policy schemes gives them access to assets like land and livestock ownership and negotiating advantage as a member of a formal group. The members as individuals can contribute to the family income, and their beneficiaries regard their contribution to the household as significant, therefore changing old mindsets and breaking rural social norms.

The sense of equality with male counterparts has enhanced the status of women as participants and decision-makers in the democratic, economic, and social spheres of life. The women employed in the SHGs have better access to health care, socioeconomic development, and independent decision-making.

Political Impact

Women's political empowerment is the key to socio-economic development. Generally, the government of any political party is seen to win over the vote of the women population. In our country and Odisha, it is 50% or equal to the male population. There has been speculation about whether these programs (through Mission Shakti) are aimed at influencing the women in the grassroots community for political gains by the government.

An independent study conducted by Atmashakti Trust sought to understand the determinants and factors influencing women voters. The study highlights women's political emancipation at the grassroots. The survey report has a sample size of 6,100 women. It observes that states with as high as 78% of the respondents are aware of their voting rights, and the age group between 25-29 years old are independent decision-makers when it comes to voting. The young population of women, who make their own decisions during electoral polls, are much more aware in this digital era. They have a global perspective on matters while making decisions. However, 50.3% of these respondents are influenced by their husbands or other external factors. The findings show that though women's participation at the Pally Sabha (Community Council) is 52.9%, it drops to 29.7% at the Gram Sabha (Village Council). Thus, there is scope to increase their participation further with the help of the SHG councils.

Cultural fairs like the 'Pitha' Festival and 'Raja Fair' can be viewed as a strategy to grow connections with the grassroots communities, where quintessential customs and traditions of the indigenous communities are celebrated. For instance, the Raja Festival (celebrates the coming of age of girls) is not a custom in the cities and is celebrated among community members of rural grassroots Odisha. Yet the focus is to make it a mainstream festival in semi-urban parts to grow women participating in socio-cultural events. The 'Pitha' festival (traditional cuisine of rural Odisha) is another instance where women of SHG groups are heavily engaged. Through these engagements and activities, the government can be seen as building a community of women loyal to the SHG groups, which they administer and have influence and power in their villages. The leverage the government has gained through this institution and activities has helped build a positive perception of women folk in the grassroots communities, which has a visible impact on their election poll results. Something which should be watched with attention so that a force like this is not misused.

Studies have proved a strong link between poverty and gender inequality; women are the most affected and vulnerable, without access to livelihood, social security, and political voice. As gender equity is considered one of the indicators of a nation's progress, education and employment are the key factors that impact the social status of women. To conclude, it can be said that SHG programs provide financial inclusion along with promoting social and economic

progress and thereby can enjoy security and emotional, intellectual, and financial well-being to a great extent.

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