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Emerging Communication Strategies for Ensuring Gender Friendly Panchayaths in Kerala-A Case Study

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ABSTRACT: Gender sensitivity is the precondition that must be strengthened and attained at all levels of society for achieving inclusive development. Women empowerment is an integral aspect of human rights and development in society. Several attempts were made to enhance and empower women in India through various development schemes and programmes since Independence. Programmes and initiatives by panchayati raj institutions have promoted women in political discourses and increased their participation in political initiatives. The study looks at the working of Panchayat institutions, the communication initiatives, strategies and patterns adopted by Panchayath to ensure gender sensitivity. The study is conducted in Tanalur panchayath, Malappuram district which is selected as the "gender friendly panchayath" by the government of Kerala. People's participation and active involvement are considered as the most inevitable factor and ideological basis for a sound democratic society. The paper tries to look at the communication initiatives, strategies and patterns followed by the Panchayath to improve the conditions of women through various communication programs. The study is conducted to know the nature of communication programmes and other emerging trends in communication to ensure women participation in activities of the rural community.

KEYWORDS: Empowerment, Rural Development, Gender Sensitivity, Communication Discourse, Mobilization, Participation.

1. Introduction

Gender equality is an important aspect of society for ensuring the overall development of a society. Gender equality has to be attained at all levels of society and it has to be adopted in all societal programs including all the growth and development initiatives so that a gender neutral society can be achieved. Several researches have proved that the societies with gender neutral policies and principles could fight poverty in a better way. Gender equality also promotes literacy, education among masses improving the living standard of people.

Education and empowerment are two important aspects of development that depend upon each other. Education aids people to face and address the hurdles in society, helps to overcome the crises and equip them to live with self reliance. Education plays a vital role in development and lead to social transformation that aims for a better equitable society. Education is a conscientization process that develops critical consciousness among masses especially among the marginalized, socially dispossessed and vulnerable sections of the society. It offers them a platform to voice their opinions so that they can speak for themselves, their rights and life.

Empowerment is the process of self transformation and empowered people can act according to their choice, needs and necessities which further aid them to make better decisions in the course of their lives. It helps to understand oneself, abilities, power and capabilities. Empowerment enhances or aids in increased participation of people in decision making processes, societal programmes and actions. It is very important for one to participate actively in all such societal programmes. The power of choice and action plays a very important role in women's life.

The Self Help Groups were started to promote economical empowerment among women. Or in other words, these initiatives encouraged the most important aspect of women empowerment, ie, financial independence. The SHGs

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empowered women by providing credit, eradicating poverty and offering them financial independence that further empowered their family.

2. Panchayats and Empowerment

Panchayats or local development institutions focuses mainly on community development programmes that aims at the rural reconstruction of villages and attaining self reliance among them. Panchayats also frames policies, programmes and schemes for promoting gender equality in society. The key role played by Panchayats was to impart education and awareness among people, promote literacy campaigns etc among the marginalized sections of people including women. Promoting literacy among women plays a significant role in empowering them. They also try to redress the gender imbalances existing in the society through various empowerment schemes and programmes. They also invite and ensure the active participation of women in developmental programmes conducted by them through various innovative strategies and with the help of live, free and fair communicative platforms.

Financial independence is an inevitable factor of women empowerment. Self Help Groups or SHG movement played a very important role in women empowerment initiatives of the state, providing credit facilities that helped to alleviate poverty, ensuring financial assistance and economic independence among women. The movement provided financial aid which further helped women in becoming successful entrepreneurs. The SHGS aids in economic empowerment activities among women and also in facilitating production and marketing activities of the state.

3. Significance of the Study

The study tries to examine the nature and trends of communication initiatives followed by the Panchayat to ensure gender sensitivity and to understand the emerging trends of communication discourse in their area that offered them the title "the gender friendly Panchayath of Kerala".

4. Methodology

Interview schedules, Observations and Focused Group Discussions (FGDs) were used to elicit the required information. The study adopts qualitative research methods. Data was collected using focus group discussions and interviews among women of age group 20 to 35 years of age from Tanalur Panchayath, Malappuram district, Kerala. Relevant Case studies were examined and interviews with women were conducted to understand their participation in Panchayath initiatives. In-depth interviews were conducted among the authorities, Panchayath officials to understand the nature and trends of communication initiatives followed by the Panchayath to ensure gender sensitivity, to know the level of participation among women in these initiatives and to understand the emerging trends of communication discourse in their area that offered them the title " the gender friendly Panchayath of Kerala".

5. Theoretical Base

Theory of Participatory Approach

Development to be meaningful, it requires self sufficiency for all, before superfluity for some. Participatory development theory aims at inclusive development including each and every section of the society, especially the socially disadvantaged sections and marginalized sections, excluded components such as women, tribal people etc. This approach views development as the process of disseminating the results of growth and development projects equally among all people without any distinction.

6. Findings and Discussion

Communication Initiatives for Empowerment of Women through Education

Education plays a crucial role in empowering a community. It helps to question the injustices meted out to them since ages thus deconstructing the so called norms pressurized on them by the patriarchal society. Education helps women to understand themselves, potentials and to build collectives and bring change through self reliance. Panchayats organize awareness classes, seminars, workshops on key areas to raise gender awareness among them with the help of concerned subject experts.

Communication Initiatives for Political Empowerment

Political awareness among masses is a pre-requisite condition for development of a society. Panchayats with the aid of government officials and funds, organize seminars and invited talks for women to raise awareness on their rights as citizens, especially aiming political empowerment.

Communication Initiatives for Improving Decision Making Skills

Special classes are arranged for women in co-operation with leading institutes of government such as IMG for improving decision making skills and self-awareness among them. Special attention is made in this regard to ensure maximum participation from grass root level.

Communication Initiatives and Economic Empowerment

Economic independence plays a very important role in a woman's life transforming them to self empowered individuals. Panchayats and Self Help Groups provide support and guidance to women community through financial assistance, especially to those aspiring and novice entrepreneurs who are in need of financial assistance. Employment generation programmes and skill development programmes are being initiated by Panchayats to make them financially independent.

Imparting Health Education through Communication Programmes

Considering the importance of community health programmes, health awareness classes on Pregnancy, Menstrual hygiene, lactating mothers etc are imparted to women through various communication initiatives and programmes for imparting health awareness by the panchayat authorities. ASHA under NRHM functions smoothly and effectively in Thanaloor panchayath.

Empowering Women and Girls through Physical Education and Sports

UNESCO stresses the importance of the gender dimension within sport policies and programmes which is critical in development process. The panchayat organizes sports camps for girls and impart sports education for girls up to higher secondary section in nearby schools. Taekwondo training is also given to girls with the help of professionals promoting self-defense among them under the title "Standing up for yourself". It provides them the platform to meet others and share ideas and to "breathe a bit of fresh air". These initiatives have developed and encouraged women activities and to make them feel relaxed.

Innovative Communication Projects

Panchayat has initiated new communication projects in collaboration with educational institutions and universities for women empowerment. Department of media studies, Malayalam University has signed a MoU with Thanaaloor panchayath for initiating gender awareness programmes. As gender initiative, panchayath has decided to

bring out a newspaper exclusively by women. Interested candidates are given training in news writing, editing, and typing. Page make up softwares are also introduced to them, thus opening a new area ie, media industry for women.

New Media Communication Initiatives

In co-operation with educational institutions nearby, such as colleges and universities, panchayats organize technological awareness classes and practical workshops to make them tech-savvy and try to bridge the digital divide to meet the needs of modern information society. Women are provided classes on how to create e-mail account, how to send mails and how to use social networking sites. The Common Service Centre (CSC) Scheme envisages the setting up of IT enabled access points in rural areas to promote e-literacy. CSCs are being designed with well established IT infrastructure and connectivity with focus on rural entrepreneurship and market mechanisms especially for women.

Awareness Classes and Counseling Sessions for Combating Violence

Classes on sexual awareness among adolescent girls, talks on sexual violence etc are arranged in special sessions that help them to face life boldly and confidently. Open discussions are carried out in classes on sexual abuse cases by leading counselors so that they openly come out with their problems they face in family or in society. In co-operation with SAKHI, panchayath conducts training programmes, courses, workshops and impart classes on sexual health and education.

Internal Development Initiatives

The respondents opined that they received internal development training workshops and trainings that provided them a space to develop their skills such as leadership capabilities and that helped to develop their cognitive and mental abilities.

Kudmbashree and its Initiatives

"Reaching out to families through women and reaching out to community through families" is the slogan of Kudumbashree. In Thanaloor panchayath, Kudumbashree is a successful project with a holistic and participatory approach, women oriented innovatives and programmes. This project aids the poorest of the poor to be a part of societal development programmes and schemes. Active participation of women in Kudumbashree initiatives has further aided them to improve their living conditions and in the empowerment of their family. The respondents opined that the kudumbashree has provided them financial aids, financial schemes and security which helped them to face life boldly and confidently. It has further empowered them socially and politically by being active members of various societal programmes.

Organization of Seminars and Workshops

The Panchayath has organized fruitful and productive activities that played a meaningful role in awareness generation. Organizing seminars on recent programmes and policies have generated awareness among public, especially among women who are active participants of panchayath activities in Thanaloor.

7. Results

- Panchayat members are active and responsible to adopt more inclusive and development practices leading to inclusive development practices.
- Healthy communication, relationship and co-ordinated efforts by panchayat members and bureaucrats play a significant role in achieving empowerment, especially among the marginalized sections of the society including women.

- Inclusion of women members in initiatives has further promoted themselves and it also allows understanding the problems faced by them, analyze it in an in-depth manner and offer solutions that are more practical, fruitful and applicable.
- More interaction and co-ordination among departments and sections of the panchayats have further made easier to communicate and co ordinate development initiatives and programmes in the area.
- Organization of workshops, camps, training programs and educational programs for the women helped in their self-development and for the societal upliftment.

8. Recommendations

- Training sessions to be organized or conducted for youth population to impart awareness sessions on the importance of panchayat institutions in empowerment initiatives of the society. They should be made aware of the various development schemes and programmes of local development institutions and should be encouraged to participate actively in the development or empowerment initiatives of Panchayats. They should be made aware of the lives, concerns and challenges faced by the people who live around them.
- The Panchayat should provide classes on the importance of gender equality or arrange sessions to promote gender equality not only for women but for all.
- The Self Help Groups can contribute more to the overall development of the society, especially by providing a helping hand to women, through financial aids and incentives thus empowering them economically.
- Organization of more productive training camps and workshops for the SHG members that may help them to find solutions to various gender issues pertaining in society.

9. Conclusion

Effective communication plays an important role in the process of empowerment. Empowerment includes social, economic and political empowerment among people. Free, fair, effective and balanced flow of information and communication at the grass root level, especially in panchayat institutions is an inevitable factor for achieving inclusive development that can in turn contribute to emancipation of women. The need of the hour is to include education especially critical education in the empowerment agenda and to ensure that the efforts for political and economic empowerment do not remain myths in women's lives. There is a need to focus on the needs, rights, priorities and necessities of women to build communicative initiatives and to frame policies and programmes based on that. Panchayats and SHGs have done much to give confidence and mobility to women through various empowerment programmes and initiatives. Critical education and awareness can play an effective role in addressing women's issues, challenges and can also offer solutions to various problems faced by women thereby assuring a more equitable society.

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