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PhD Thesis Title: Empowerment of Women in Haryana: A Study of Sakshar Mahila Samooh (SMS) Scheme

ABSTRACT

1. Introduction

Haryana has shown remarkable economic growth in the post-independence era but delayed in recognizing its own social problems. The State of Haryana, Department of Women and Child Development in the year 2007, introduced a scheme called "Sakshar Mahila Samooh" i.e. a group of educated women in every village would lend the necessary resource support to the Gram Panchayat and its subcommittee for effective dispense of the functions assigned to them. This was an innovative idea of forming all women community based organization (women CBO) at the grass-root level to empower rural women to take action for the development of their community. In this context, the present study focused on the role of literate village women and their involvement under the SMS scheme in generating health awareness, social awareness, social support and related activities, the change of roles for the women and the enhancement of their social status as active participants. The Researcher attempted to study the process of 'empowerment' through SMS scheme.

2. Research Methodology

The present study was conducted in 3 districts namely Sonapat, Panipat and Jind. Total 9 villages were identified purposefully with active SMS groups for the present study. In one SMS group, there are 25 members that include one leader and twenty four members. The total sample in 9 SMSs was 225 that bring out 9 leaders and 216 members. The researcher used interview schedule, interview guide, and observation sheet and focused group discussion to study the process of empowerment using both descriptive analysis for qualitative data and thematic analysis for qualitative data.

3. Main Findings of the study

The scheme has given impetus to the rural women to address issues that affect their lives. With formation of SMS, the participation of rural WOMEN MEMBERS has increased as it has given them space and authority to influence vulnerable members of the community. The distribution of SMS members by age groups revealed that more than half of the SMS members (52 percent) were from 30-49 years of age group. This indicates active involvement and interest of middle aged women in SMS activities. The scheme exclusively seeks participation of literate women to uplift the village communities. The data shows that one-third percentage of women (75 percent) had qualification up to Matriculation or Senior Secondary level. Through the SMS, 40 percent of the members have participated actively in mass demonstration for various issues like removing arrack shops located near the village, a demonstration in District collector's office etc. The study noted that little less than half percent of the SMS members raised the certain issues in the Gram Sabha. The relation of Panchayats with SMSs was not very positive due to the fact that the SMSs were acting as an oversight agent to seek accountability from the panchayat. The study found that 71 percent of the SMS members were motivated to contest in an election. 80 percent of

the members of the SMS joined self-help groups after having joined the SMS. The SMS members were found to have made special efforts in mobilizing and sustaining the SHGs. The study shows that there was a considerable impact on the autonomy of the members to visit their parental home. The use of veil may be interpreted differently in different religions and regions but it certainly shows a patriarchal mindset where respect by a women is paid by covering her face in front of elders or may be husband and also while moving out in the community. Impact of SMS on member's decision to refuse to observe Purdha (veil) within Family was on 25.3 percent members. The Impact of the SMS on the ability to take crucial decisions regarding children's education, marriage etc. was noted among 90 percent of the members. The scheme also noted various challenges of SMS members in the process of empowerment. Lack of ownership of the nodal department i.e. Department of Women and Child Development was the most pressing issues which came out during discussions with the SMS members and key informants. Red tapism, corruption and financial irregularities in providing continuous funds, and projects to the SMSs leaders were also identified as challenges in the process of empowerment. Also the mindset of higher officials hampers enabling environment for these rural women members of SMS. The narratives of these literate and educated rural women shows that they were facing facing issues in running their organization due to State's patriarchal mindset.

4. Suggestions

- The nodal department should also give special attention to the SMS as scheme for women 'empowerment'.
- The convergence with different state departments to facilitate SMSs with funds to work with issues related to women and other community services should be more effective by allocating separate budget for NGOs and special preference should be given to the SMSs.
- The nodal department and other relevant department's officials should also be trained and sensitized to work with such community-based women's group. Such trainings should be provided to officials at all levels.
- If the SMSs will be given technical support and projects, they can create successful entrepreneurship programs too.
- The SMSs activities and interventions should be taken up for research to study its impact in the community, its relations with the community especially with poor and vulnerable groups. Such study can help to develop further interventions by the SMSs.

5. Conclusion

The initiative of the State to register these SMSs as village NGOs to empower rural women is a welcoming move. Only increasing the number of organizations on paper will not resolve the issue unless exclusive support system in terms of separate monitoring machinery to upscale in terms of quality and output is provided. The active presence of SMS in villages can actually transform the situation of rural Haryana.