

Relationship Between Participation And Empowerment In Women Self Help Groups In Nigeria – A General Analysis.

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Abstract: In recent year, women's empowerment through participation is said to be at the center stage in global development. The paper seeks to examine the relationship between participation in Self Help Group's (SHG) activities and women empowerment in Nigeria. The participation of women in (SHGs) made a significant impact in social, economical and psychological aspects. Women empowerment through participation in SHG which is the focus of this paper is a process in which women are able to organize themselves to increase self-reliance and to assert their independent right to make choices in order to effectively promote their well being. The processes through which women achieve empowerment through participating in SHG is the essence of this article.

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Introduction

Recently, issues of women's empowerment through participation in Self Help Groups (SHGs) have gained grounds globally. In most of the developing countries today like Nigeria, more and more emphasis is laid on the need for development of women and their active participation in the main agenda of development process. It is generally believe that one of the powerful approaches to women empowerment and rural entrepreneurship is the formation and participation in SHG activities among women. The increased formation of SHGs and participation of Nigerian women in self help group activities, arise from the perceived problem of women's lack of access to resources. As a group oriented model, SHG is a strategy that brings about individual and collective empowerment through improvement in both 'condition' and 'position' of women. Through SHGs, women can be organized as collective entity toward the overall goal of achieving gender equality as well as sustainable comprehensive community development (Purushothaman, 1988). 2 As women experience powerlessness in and through the interaction of multiple social, political and economic institutions (Carr, Chen and Jbabvala, 1966), the self reliance spirit promotes through SHG hasten women's development aims to empower them. Thus an important aspect of self help projects is the implicit assumption that through active participation in the process, women will gain, generate and acquire, and improve their 'position' within the family and the society (Mazumdar, 1986). Along this, psychological empowerment or inner processes among participants such as self-esteem and self-confidence are developed

so that women are able to motivate themselves into further action (Monkman, 1998). This is possible to take place in SHG that often known for their democratic practice.

Self Help Group approach is therefore the acts of contributing to growth by active participation of the women through a process of social mobilization. This alternative approach of Self Help Group activities and the communitarian philosophy of the people have not only accelerated the level of growth but had also spread the benefits of development to the rural areas of Nigeria. Therefore, the increasing awareness of the importance of relationship between participation and empowerment calls for an in-depth study of women participation in SHGs.

This article is based on secondary sources available in journals, internet, working papers, official reports and program books on Nigerian development programs. Content analysis approach was employed to those materials to unveil self help practices among women in their participation in those empowerment programs.

PARTICIPATION AND EMPOWERMENT – a theoretical account

Empowerment has been used widely together with participation and there is a claim of relationship between the two (Abbot, 1995, Zimmerman, 1990). Some suggest that participation and empowerment is twin strategy to promote sustainable, people centered development, equal opportunities and social justice (Mayo and Craig, 1995). However, this relationship may be complex and complicated. Hzhaky and Schwartz (2004) found that not all the elements of empowerment are affected by all the elements of

participation. When participation affects empowerment, the path 3 can be direct, indirect or combined. Voluntary participation is an empowering process which people in partnership with each other and those able to assist them, identify problems and needs, mobilize resources, and assume responsibility to plan, manage, control and access the individual and collective actions that they themselves decided upon (Brett, 2003). Here participation is seen as a process when community or group members either men or women's group engaged in the development activities. Participation is a medium for empowerment to take place when women in a group (SHG group for example) engaged in identifying problems, decision-making and implementing a program, where they learnt together, develop their confidence, skills, and subsequently contribute to their development. Empowerment is a measure of people's capacity to bring about change, which is concern with analyzing and addressing the dynamic of oppression and assisting groups and individuals to play an active role in the decisions which affect their lives (Desai, 2000; Pulhazhendhi, 2000). An empowered community has the power and capacity to influence the decision and changes in the social system. Communities with higher rates of citizen participation were much more likely to have citizen control of their governing boards, more diverse board memberships, greater adoption of the empowerment approach, and as a result-higher level of success in attracting the resources needed to implement their plans (Raid, 2000).

Empowerment will be derived in the greater participation of the poor and marginalized in the economic, social and civic domains within their communities, thereby gaining access to government and community resources (Narayam et al, 1999). Empowerment involves action at the grassroots level, creating self-awareness and the transformation of society, and leading to negotiated power-sharing. Therefore, the participation and involvement of women in self help group activities can lead to empowerment where they can gain control over their lives, resources and ideology. Active and genuine participation of women in self help group development process is one of the vital conditions of sustainable women and community development (Khalil and Hossein, 2011).

Women Empowerment and Self Help Approach

Women's empowerment through Self Help Group activities can be viewed as a 4 continuous process of several inter-related and mutually reinforcing components because it is a process of awareness and capacity building, leading to greater participation, greater decision-making power and control the transformative action to overcome the

constraints in this process (Desai, 2000; Puhazhendhi, 2000). Participation in Self Help Groups (SHGs) certainly help members to empower themselves (Chesler, 2006). Empirically, it was found that women participation in Self Help Groups programs is instrument in reducing family burden, loneliness and guilt-feeling and a micro-level, Self Help Group member's advocacy activities can affect government policies (Citron, et al, 1999). Through the involvement of the women in Self Help Group programs, it will enhance the development of their skills and abilities to plan, to make decisions and implement projects and programs. Thus, the women will have control and deciding and taking action on the development programs that are essential to them. Thus, the SHGs have been found to be an effective tool for women empowerment and rural development. The SHG pools the creative and financial resources of most rural women in Nigeria to run some profitable ventures or to meet the financial needs of its members in times of emergence situation. The imperative of such self help approaches for women go beyond the obvious economic empowerment, cooperatives such as those that promote bonding among their members and indirectly train the members in life and business skills, including money management, running organizations, understanding investment and confidence to run their own ventures. Beside this, such initiatives bring the community closer together and encouraging participation of the men folk too, promotes empowerment of women on all fronts.

The self help approach has the potentials of establishing capacity building and self-efficiency among women and plans a role in social-economic development of women in particular and society as a whole. The Self Help Groups intermediate by agricultural activities in Nigeria and indeed most African countries have been shown to have positive effects on women, with some of those impacts been ripple effects (Yahaya, 1999). These approaches have played valuable roles in reducing the vulnerability of the Nigerian poor women, through asset creation, provision of emergency assistance and empowering women by giving them control over assets and increased self esteem and knowledge (Safiya, 2011)

As such, SHGs have been instrumental in empowering by enabling women to work together in collective agency. Women's networks do not usually obtain business or political favor as they command few economic resources and frequently rely on time and non-monetized labor exchange (Putman, 2000). A related aspect is that Self Help Groups have facilitated the formation of social capital, where people learn to work together for a common goal in a group. Self Help Groups have a special role for empowering rural women that provide a critical outlet for building the

way for faster, fairer, and more sustainable socio-economic status of them (Khalil and Hossein, 2011).

They play a vital role in agricultural daily reproductive tasks and income generating activities, as most of them are illiterate or less educated and unable to attend formal training courses, social or economic activities. But, in fact, less value is given to their contributions, and rural women are less likely to realize their capacity to make a life better for themselves, families and communities (Akinsanmi, 2005). Therefore, it can be anticipated here that Self Help Groups play a role as catalyst in this process through achieving both individual and group purposes to reach empowerment. The women's empowerment and a wide spread network of Self Help Groups (SHGs) which have strong grassroots presence and deep insight into women's concern have contributed in aspiring initiative for the empowerment of Nigerian women.

BENEFITS OF PARTICIPATION IN SELF HELP GROUPS

The recent literature on participation of women in SHGs has stressed the involvement of women as imperative in the process of their empowerment. SHGs occur as a result of people's awareness of their felt needs and the fact that they possess the ability to solve their problems through their own individual or collective efforts (Josephine, 2011). The first idea of the principle of SHG is that it must come from the intense desire and awareness of the people themselves that their social emancipation would be realized (Onyeozu, 2007). Self help actually emanates from the ardent desire of the people to do something positive in order to free from deplorable socio-economic condition. Participation of women in SHGs enables them to acquire inimitable psychological benefit to rise up psychologically powerful which is an essence for women empowerment in any socio-cultural and economic environment and situations (Sambangi, 2009). When participants of the SHGs interact with each other to make meaningful changes in their behavior and influenced, individual and collectively empowerment occur (Nylund, 2000). Asian Development Bank (2002) stipulated that women's access to financial services through participation in group projects would benefit members to contribute to poverty reduction as it enables women to contribute to household income and family welfare, thereby making transition out of their poverty easier for their families.

From active participation in group activities, women can bring about desired change by expressing one's desire; either individually or through a community group and participant learns to understand and appreciate the individual needs and interests of all group members.

Devalatha (2005) advanced the following importance and benefits accruing to participation of women in SHGs:

- SHG enhance the quality of status of women
- All stages of economic and social activities, involvement of women becomes essential. It encourages women to take active parts in the socio-economic progress of the nation
- The SHGs empower women and train them to take active part in the socio-economic progress of the nation and make them sensitized, self made and self disciplined
- SHGs may remove the social limitations of women such as superstition and may contribute for their dominant role in decision making
- The SHGs have inculcated a great in the minds of rural women to succeed in their day to day life.
- Brings unity among women and reduces the difference of the caste and religion,
- Improve social awareness among women
- Involvement of women to fulfill the basic needs of rural living gets enhanced
- Participation of women in democratic activities gets multiplied
- May encourage women's participation in eradication of social problems such as violence against women
- Provides initiative for basic education to girls.

BARRIERS TO WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION AND EMPOWERMENT IN NIGERIA

Lack of women's empowerment has been considered as the bane of the economy of many African countries, particularly Nigeria. The indispensable role of women in any development calls for eradication to all related barriers to women empowerment at all levels. Women empowerment is the development of mental and physical capacity, power or skills in women for them to operate meaningful in the social milieu, thereby experiencing a more favorable level of social recognition and subsequent enhance their socio-economic status (Akomolafe, 2006). The aim of women's empowerment through participation in self help group's activities is to enhance the socio-economic status of women through acquainting them with skills and literacy training for various economic ventures and activities as well as creation of economic culture that will address the question of technical know-how in pursuing of women's multifaceted roles (Safiya, 2011). Women empowerment in Nigeria is very low compared to their male counterparts. Most jobs performed by Nigerian women do not have economic values and all works and activities that do not require financial reward are the responsibilities of Nigerian women.

Nigeria women have been contributing their quota to the development of the nation however their potentials have not been tapped due to some constraints. Nigerian women are relegated to the background as they lack the educational, economic and political power necessary to actualize their potentials. The disparities between Nigerian women and men in terms of political, social, educational and economic achievement cannot be divorced from some problems which hinder between the two groups (Yahaya, 1999).

Illiteracy is one of the major barriers to women's empowerment in Nigeria. The cultures in Nigeria give preference to male children as they are usually seen as the rulers of the family (Akinsami, 2005). 8 Female children are usually not given adequate opportunity to acquire formal education which is necessary condition for empowerment. This impediment attributes to low self concept on the part of Nigerian women most of who believe that the males are better than them in human endeavors. Some religious leaders and their adherents strongly believe that women stand not to participate in economic activities and these believe adversely affect the way women are treated and the opportunities provided for them. Other barriers to women's empowerment and participation in Nigeria include:

Discriminatory attitudes of males: The Nigerian men have been in control of political, economic as well as social spheres of life for many years. They have been able to utilize the opportunity to their advantage and this does not give women equal opportunities (Yahaya, 1999).

Low participation of women in politics: The level of women's participation in politics is very low. Nigerian women do not usually contest elective posts but limits their activities to voting in elections. This attitude is related to their level of education and poor economic base. It has adverse effects on women's struggle for emancipation (Yahaya, 1999)

Poor economic base: Most Nigerian women are poor. This situation is related to their low level of educational attainment. Poverty is reflected in almost all aspects of an average Nigerian women's life (Yahaya, 1999).

DISCUSSION

The results of this study show that participation and empowerment are closely related to each other. It is evident that participation in Self Help Groups (SHGs) certainly helps members to empower themselves.

Participation is the prime ingredient for empowerment. Self Help Groups are medium for participation to take place. It is evident that through women participation in the group activities, women gain and acquire power, and improved their well being

and position within the society. As women participate, satisfaction and perceived feelings of self-worth are used as indicators of women's feeling of self empowerment. A 9 conclusion could be reached those women participation in Self Help Group activities is a relevant strategy for women empowerment in Nigeria. The result has actually showed that in Self Help approach, intrinsic value is accorded to participation and it is evident that there is a strong linkage between participation in group approach and women empowerment.

CONCLUSION

It is concluded from the detailed study of this paper that women empowerment in Nigeria which is declared as millennium development goal cannot be overstressed especially in a democratic society like ours that recognizes the need for women to develop their potentials and contribute to the overall development of the society. Nigerian women need to actively participate in Self Help activities as the strategy that has become a prevailing, imperative, and valuable way for women empowerment in parts of the mainstream humanity.

Finally, it is concluded from this study that introduction and active participation of Nigerian women in Self Help Group approach will lead to empowering women especially at the rural areas.

RECOMMENDATION

Self Help Groups have a special role for empowering rural women that provide a critical outlet for building the way for more sustainable socio-economic status of women. Skills acquisition centers need to be established in some selected areas for Nigerian women to learn more income generating skills. On the top of that, education has an important role to play as far as women empowerment is concerned. For that, open access to education is paramount for the Nigerian women, especially the rural areas.

Empowerment is a measure of people's capacity to bring about change, which is concern with analyzing and addressing the dynamic of oppression and assisting groups and individuals to play an active role in the decisions which affects their lives, therefore streamlining of different models of Self Help Groups activities is an important issue that requires the attention of the Nigerian policy makers. 10

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