

Exploring Enablers and Challenges to Women's Participation in Cooperatives

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Abstract

There is significant contribution of women entrepreneurial efforts on wealth creation in economies (de Bruin, Brush & Welter,2006) . A continuous stride observed in recent decades for achieving greater gender equity in society. Nevertheless, deep gender disparities are present across the globe, reflecting labor market as well as other sections. There are many evidences especially in developing countries showing women work individually often in isolation in the informal economy functioning at a low level of productivity thus reaping marginal income. Gender equity is increasingly seen as one of the pillar for inclusive and sustainable development. Alternative developmental approach which incorporates women's equality in work is desired. The United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development (RIO+20) acknowledged the role of cooperatives for social inclusion and reducing poverty, particularly in developing countries.(UNGA,2012).Rooted in value of self-help equality and equity, cooperatives are well positioned to offer equal opportunities of participation for both men and women. Despite a push for gender equity in cooperative policy and practices a little evidence has documented the effect of cooperatives on women's empowerment and equity.

This piece of paper would be primarily based on systematic literature review, and would attempt to explore the barriers and enablers in cooperatives enterprises with reference to women empowerment and equity in developing countries. This will be useful for indicating areas that warrant research in future and would help identify constructs for the framework

Key words: empowerment, inclusive development, sustainable, cooperatives

Introduction

There is significant contribution of women entrepreneurial efforts on wealth creation in economies (de Bruin, Brush & Welter,2006) . A continuous stride observed in recent decades for achieving greater gender equity in society. The foundation towards closing gender gaps was laid twenty years back during Fourth World conference on Women in 1995 with adoption of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for action (ILO,1995). Now International Cooperative Alliance and International Labour Organisation have joined together to assess how co-operative movement contributes towards women's empowerment. Great efforts have been put forward gender balancing in the last two decades. Although deeply rooted gender disparities is still common across the world. There are many evidences especially in developing countries showing

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women work individually often in isolation in the informal economy functioning at a low level of productivity thus reaping marginal income(ILO,1995). Women still earning lesser and are in higher proportion of unpaid labour and more aptly excluded from decent work opportunities. Gender equity is increasingly seen as one of the pillar for inclusive development. It is now being accepted that attainment of sustainable economic development goal is not possible unless gender inequality is abridged. Understanding the truth, United Nations Members State assented to include gender equality and women's empowerment as a standalone Sustainable Development Goal (SDG).

Cooperatives are being realized as a very important and potential vehicle for empowerment where people get together to attain their goals. Co-operatives are often founded as a mass phenomenon during periods of want, social crisis and group antagonisms (Müller 1976, 6; Von Brentano 1980) Cooperatives, a collective enterprise enable women to work together in solidarity and upscale them to overcome the restrictions to pursue economic activities and provide a platform of networking for mutual support. Co-operatives as defined by International Cooperative alliance are, an autonomous association of persons united voluntarily to meet their common economic, social, and culture needs and aspiration through jointly owned and democratically controlled enterprises (ICA, 1995). Based on the principle of one person –one vote all the members have equal opportunity of participating on equal terms in this enterprise.

Co-operative initiatives are one of the most effective solutions with enrooted values of self -help, equality and equity. Creating economic opportunities for marginalized section- especially women through co-operative development is one of the critical areas set in the Blue Print for a cooperative decade followed by general Assembly of Alliance in 2012. Cooperatives is known instrument to support women's practical and strategic needs by assisting them to access income generation opportunities.

There are different kinds of co-operatives societies in different spheres like producer's cooperatives, consumer's co-operatives, tribal co-operatives etc. Women co-operative societies are the unique co-operatives which are established in for targeting specific goals. There are strong link between poverty reduction and women's involvement in cooperatives (Selhausen & Felix,2015). Cooperatives is known instrument to support women's practical and strategic needs by assisting them to access income generation opportunities (Maleko &,Msuys 2015).

This is facilitating women to take part in better productive activities and earn greater income. Membership in cooperatives helping them in terms of increased sharing in household decision making and enhanced participation in community affairs. There is huge body of literature that confirm that women engaged in cooperatives are able to lead better life with enhanced social capital that otherwise a challenge.

The degree of improvement is diverse according to the perspective and circumstances. Growing attention of gender issues and definite progression of women into leadership role with increased number of women owned cooperatives are a few evidences. Europe and North America witness achievement in gender equality in financial and social sector wherein India and Africa progress is in agricultural sector. There are various manifestations of gender empowerment and equality, and also several barriers identified to women's participation in cooperatives.

Enablers to women's participation in cooperatives for gender equality

There are strong connects between women's participation in cooperatives and reduction of poverty as per recent research findings from ILO's cooperative units. It is witnessed that women engaged in new and more productive activities with increased income after joining as members of cooperatives. Women also feel comfortable and satisfied as they are able to share care giving responsibilities of children, old aged and other family members after being part of cooperatives. Evidences are also there that reflect higher level of participation in house hold decisions. Women also feel better connected in community affairs with this increased participation.

There are three noticeable, overlapping, mutually reinforcing enabling factors that cooperative practices have echoed. They are – access to employment and work, improved work conditions and social benefits.

- Cooperative undoubtedly provides increased access to employment to women directly and indirectly as well. In terms of direct effect, women are gaining larger and better employment opportunities by increased access to business and market places. It also give support to start and grow their own business by facilitating legal, financial and marketing services with specific customized module as per women's need. This not only offer opportunities for self-employment but also offer jobs to others and extends inclusion to most marginalized women.
- Beyond women's access to employment, Cooperatives help improve in the working conditions of women. Cooperatives are truly democratic in functioning. They are controlled by and run for the benefit of all members. Reason why appropriate considerations are made for improvement in the working conditions that helps women a lot.
- Collective bargaining power is also enhanced in working cooperatively. Women gain better collective bargaining capacities that extend capacity to negotiate with external power and have equal access and opportunities to resources.
- These practices lead to create transparency in routine working and financial transactions that improves profitability and efficiency. This is kind of ease of doing prompts positive working culture in the cooperatives.
- Cooperatives also generate various indirect effects in the favor of women in terms of overall quality of life as such as food security, child care, finance, housing, health

- care etc. In other words women have improved accessibility with affordable cost, once that are part of cooperatives.
- Cooperatives working approach induces other influence on diverse aspects of women's lives. With better positioning to address social and personal requirements such as freedom from violence, environmental protection, greater awareness regarding relevant subjects, participation in cooperatives directs women towards more empowering position.
 - Participation in cooperatives lends women respect, self-esteem, and recognition. This is due to their active engagement in confidence building process to take on leadership roles at various stages in the organization and beyond.

This indicates that cooperatives are more responsive towards needs of members including women and ultimately community at large. All enabling factors are instrumental for empowering women at larger scale. Thus the co-operative enterprises considered as a phenomenal tool in uniting people and marching them towards the realm of inclusive development.

Barriers to Women's participation in Cooperatives

Cooperatives also have similar working practices like other form of enterprises. Edger Parnell, whose seminal work is known for re-inventing cooperatives had prayed God for saving cooperatives from misguided academicians, professionals, politicians, governments etc. in early 1990's (Lewis,2001). Reason why, there are were many problems that were limiting benefits to the members. One of issue is gender inequality. It is not shocking to see gender disproportions in the cooperatives even it is fundamentally based on values and collective principles. Developing world face this restriction, especially that prohibit women's equal participation. There are some barriers that limit the gains to women even after joining cooperatives.

- One amongst, is low level of active participation and their limited representation and involvement in decision making and leadership responsibilities. Cooperatives cannot claim truly democratic status unless equal women's participation is assured. Women's need and interests are not easy to achieve because of this major barriers.
- Traditional role of women in society and prevalent belief that the prime responsibility of women is domestic and reproductive duties not the professional ones. This pushes women at the margin of cooperative and business sphere.
- Subsequently, it restrict their scope in the world of work and minimize choices of economic openings.
- The outcome of this tendency has additional negative effect in terms of women's participation in cooperatives. Non- paid household responsibilities as home makers often spared a little choice in terms of time and energy left for complete and vigorous participation in cooperatives.

- Another major stumbling block to women's fuller participation in cooperatives is lack of access to resources. Generally women lack access to land, credit and other production assets. This touches both, performance of existing cooperatives and also starting new enterprises. No women can assert their role and positions unless they enjoy independence in ownership of assets and resources.
- Success of any cooperatives depends on the appropriate skill set of the members. Low level of skills is another barrier for recognising women's role in cooperatives. Women's educational expertise is not as equal to men normally. Differential experience that generated by exposure also influence the unequal participation among men and women. In fact overall women is marginalized at the outset thus all the more difficult to possess equal opportunities and access.
- Legal limitation is also prohibiting factor in women's participation in cooperatives. ILO studies showed that in general cooperatives are gender unbiased. Women's face barriers in the participation because of the discrimination against women with respect to property ownership and inheritance. In some instances, women face difficulties in conducting business independently or without husband's agreement. Implementation level of law is issue in many cases. Sometime they are superseded by customary laws. This hampers equal participation of women.
- Lack of social, economic, legal rights are also found partly descriptive barriers for low participation in decision making and leadership roles.

Overcoming the challenges

Report of the Cooperative Commission of UK (2001) states that management for active and equal opportunities can start new beginning and improve market share by enlarging the customer base, especially where they identified with the specific policies and practices like caste, gender, age, race and disability etc.

Many cooperatives have clear policies and documents in place on promoting equal women's participation for optimum resource mobilization but reality differs. Execution in words and spirit is a challenge. There is need of soul search and sensitization of managers and policy makers for ensuring equity in participation in all dimensions. Systematic understanding and sincere commitment would motivate for proactive measures for attainment of equity in true sense. Mainstreaming of gender concerns in all cooperative policies, vision, mission, legislation, strategy, planning, programme design, and outcome is essential.

In-depth understanding of enablers and barriers and also of salient features of cooperative identity can show definite pointers for designing of cooperative policies and strategies for women's equal access and optimum role realization. Prioritization is must for more equal

allocation of management and leadership roles through affirmative actions. Women's equal access to resources in cooperatives like training, credit, skill, education would be great help for equal contribution and also reaping the benefits same as men. There is need to reinvent and reframe the approach and new strategy for sustainable growth of cooperatives specially to achieve gender inclusive growth. Only then all members –men and women will equally contribute and cooperative will flourish.

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