

Women's Socio-economic Development in India: The Role of Non-governmental Organizations

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Jacobs (2000) and McLean (2000) affirm the need to expand boundaries of HRD to include multiple topics in a variety of contexts. Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) provide possibilities and limitations for the socio-economic development of women in India. The roles of NGOs in serving the socio-economic needs of women provide a broader, non-traditional context for exploring HRD processes and services at a national level.

Keywords: NGOs, Gender, Economic Development

Mainstream HRD literature fails to critically explore how NGOs function within the complex nature of women's socio-economic development in India. These entities seemingly have the potential to transform the poorest regions of India through economic, educational, and agricultural strategies (Jha & Kumar, 2000). This research explores the strengths, limitations, and possibilities of NGOs to serve the socio-economic needs of poor women in the complex cultural context of India.

India's present socio-economic situation does not favor poor women. Socio-economic forces (patriarchy, labor, education, and government initiatives) greatly influence NGOs' priorities for women's development in India. Each variable affects the complex nature of human development. This paper examines the extent to which these four themes influence the priorities of NGOs, and their effectiveness towards women's development in India.

A critique of NGOs illuminates their strengths, limitations, and possibilities for women's development issues. A brief description of the origins of NGOs introduces a discussion of their strengths and challenges to determine the extent to which they support poor women's socio-economic needs in India. Conflicting views about NGOs present an opportunity for discourse, reflection, and research. Finally, an exploration of recommendations for improvement of NGOs is presented to promote dialogue and action concerning social and economic empowerment of poor women in India.

Conceptual Framework

This study incorporates a literature review to explore the role of Indian NGOs in serving socio-economical needs of poor women. Utilizing a feminist framework, Bierema and Cseh (2003) conducted an analysis of 600 AHRD papers published between 1996-2000 and discovered a minimal six percent of topics that focused on diversity. Such a wide gap in inclusion of multiple frameworks indicates a need to explore non-traditional topics that can inform HRD. This article utilizes a conceptual framework of voluntarism, Gandhian philosophy of non-violent resistance, feminist theory, and HRD to investigate the role of NGOs in India. These disparate pluralities of theoretical and conceptual orientations can serve to expand the parameters of HRD scholars (Roth, 2003). Competing research perspectives and paradigms are healthy for the realm of HRD – they provide scholars access to fresh questions about HRD. The lead author of this article is a female of Indian decent with a strong interest in diversity, feminism, and international human development issues.

The boundaries of HRD scholarship become fuzzier as scholars around the globe search for common ground. Many Western authors focus on processes, systems, and people within organizations. Some Eastern scholars not only consider HRD within organizations, but they broaden HRD to include the political economy. A few authors go beyond workforce issues and encourage HRD scholars to consider the health and well-being of a nation's people. For example, Pavlish (2002) noted the disparities between the poor countries of the Southern Hemisphere compared to those of the Northern Hemisphere as outlined by the World Health Organization. She urged HRD scholars and practitioners to connect the role of HRD to the disparities of health, education, and knowledge that afflict residents of impoverished communities. With a focus on improving the overall health of the world's people, Pavlish suggested a human resource model for creating, crafting, collaborating, connecting and contributing knowledge to

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construct humane and sustainable social communities. It is within this broad focus on knowledge capital and caring leadership that this research was inspired – an inquiry into the socio-economic conditions of women in poor sectors of India and how these factors influence NGO responses. This perspective is aligned with authors who stress strategies for workforce development that can serve a nation, and note the importance of aligning public and private systems for the betterment of people and organizations within social contexts (Jacobs & Hawley, 2003; Naquin, 2002; Holton & Naquin, 2002; Bates & Redmann, 2002).

Amartya Sen (1999) studied economic reforms in India and found that income enables other capacities, and argues that economic discrimination is a much “broader concept” and includes additional factors (p.108). Factors such as patriarchy, labor, education, and government initiatives emerged as the main underlying factors affecting the socio-economic status of poor women in India.

Culture permeates all aspects of life in India, so this research can contribute to the understanding of the complex nature of economic development. Each micro issue fits into a larger pattern of socio-economic relationships in the complex web of Indian society. Women in poor sectors of India suffer from gender and social discriminations that restrict their access to labor and education, while government initiatives struggle to provide sustainable socio-economic improvements for such marginalized populations. The notion of international HRD infers a world of inter-connectedness. This study can inform HRD scholars and practitioners by extending existing literature and providing an understanding of an international perspective from a complex contextual location that should provide insights about leadership in Indian non-profit organizations.

Method

Multiple business and social studies databases were searched to explore the socio-economic status of marginalized women in India such as ABI Inform, ERIC, Wilson SelectPlus, Article First, PsycInfo, Social Sciences Abstracts, Social Services Abstracts, Sociological Abstracts, WorldCat, and Dissertation Abstracts. In addition, Journals and World Wide Web were utilized using a multiple search engine called Dogpile.com. Library books from national and international libraries were recalled on loan and scanned for recurring themes of Indian NGOs, women’s socio-economic status, and women’s development issues. Key descriptors and key words used were: NGOs, women, India, poverty, women’s development, research, social impact, economics, human resource, Asia, self-employment, women’s studies, culture, leadership, gender, and income. Searches were limited to India and women’s economic issues.

Origins of NGOs and Socio-economic Focus in India

The role of NGOs enables a broader exploration of a non-traditional context for exploring HRD processes and services at a national level. Although evidence of voluntarism in India dates back to 1500 BC, M.K. Gandhi is most noted for initiating a national effort of “institutionalized and individual or group voluntary actions, for the alleviation of suffering and social and economic development of the poor” (Rai & Tandon, 2000, p.4).

Many early voluntary organizations in India chose to follow either the Gandhian or religious ideology. The famine in Bihar during 1966 and the refugee problem in Bangladesh during 1971 influenced an increase of NGOs resulting in a new professional arena of opportunities for HRD (Rai & Tandon, 2000). Rai & Tandon argue that because human capital investment was not a major goal of many NGOs, economic development has not been adequate. Recently, many organizations in India have attempted to facilitate economic empowerment by providing access to micro-finance. Some organizations focus on policy issues at national levels by intervening on behalf of marginalized populations (Rai & Tandon).

Common NGO characteristics include: Private ownership and control, non-profit (or perhaps not-for-profit) status, legal status; principal function as people-centered development, and not financially self-reliant (Bhat, 2000). Initial conceptual frameworks for voluntary organizations in India were based on ideas of self-help and community service (S. Sen, 1999). In a collective society such as India, voluntary community service dates back to Vedic times. The absence of formal welfare programs prompted families and communities to work collaboratively during times of crisis. One famous voluntary organizer, Mahatma Gandhi, founded a national consciousness movement in India initiating a radical non-violent peace movement called satyagraha. Satyagraha originated from two Sanskrit words, sat (truth), and agraha (firmness) (M. K. Gandhi, 1983). Many Indian NGOs continue to be greatly influenced by this Gandhian philosophy (Mathiot, 1998).

The Gandhian ideology explains why many Indians dislike the Western term “NGO” preferring to use the original term “voluntary agencies” (p. 332). Eventually, community organizations became formalized. Choudhary (2000) defined voluntary organizations as “a group of persons who organise themselves on the basis of voluntary

membership with external and State Control, for the furtherance of some common interests of members” (p. 37). In the Indian context, the government became involved in voluntary groups during the 20th century.

During the 1950s and 1960s India’s government became conspicuously assertive in an attempt to assume the primary role of economic growth. Due to its inability to effectively implement this goal, the government requested NGO assistance with poverty eradication programs (Choudhary, 2000). Gradually as time and experience presented lessons learned, necessary changes became evident. During the 1980s the government focus shifted to socio-economic empowerment although minimal guidelines were provided (Choudhary). The Indian government had lofty economic goals, but did not possess the knowledge or expertise to implement this new ideology. NGOs were sought out as mechanisms to reach these economic goals. Debates continue regarding whether this was an effective tactical strategy.

Socio-economic needs of the Indian population influenced a change in conceptualization for NGOs. In the 1990s women were “discovered” as major participants in the economic arena and influenced NGO priorities (Mathiot, 1998, p. 97). A major sector of the Indian people suffers from dire economic conditions – thirty-six percent (320 million) of India’s population lives in poverty (M. Sen, 2000). Large-scale government programs failed to provide relief for small-scale needs. A recent response to this troubling situation has been the micro-economic strategies of NGOs (Bhat, 2000). A commonly held tenet of NGOs is that micro-finance can make tangible, positive steps toward alleviating poverty (M. Sen, 2000). The supporting logic of this tenet is that low-income women cannot afford to wait for macro developments to take effect – they need micro strategies for their basic survival needs and their pursuit of economic self-reliance. Initial foci of new NGOs appear to support this claim. Many new NGOs initiate their efforts with small relief projects that allow women to gain experience, knowledge, status, and adequate funding. These small successes empower women and serve as a precursor to larger initiatives.

Successful Strategies of NGOs

Improvements of the economic status of women through the actions of NGOs have been well documented: Direct financing became available through banks, financial organizations, donors, private corporations, government programs, and as a result of NGO training programs (Jain, 2000). However, provision of these examples of services are not without contextual barriers. Jha and Kumar (2000) conducted a study of an NGO in a rural region of Bihar. They noted that government officials were reluctant to assist, rely on, or otherwise cooperate with NGOs. NGOs commonly overcome these barriers because locality, diversity, flexibility, and autonomy are their main strengths (Ebrahim, 2001; Kumar, 2000; Madon & Sahay, 2002; Sooryamoorthy & Gangrade, 2001).

NGOs are diverse in their nature, size, missions, goals, and purposes resulting in manifold descriptions and definitions. Viswanath (1991) defines NGOs as “non-governmental, organized collectives with a purpose” (p. 4). Descriptions of NGOs include a number of themes, including indigenous, intermediaries, voluntary organizations, reformist, visionary, transformist, pragmatic, idealistic, participatory, change agent, alternatives, flexible, creative, democratic, and advocacy (Appell, 1996; Das, 2001; Ebrahim, 2001; Madon & Sahay, 2002; A.K. Sen, 1999; Sooryamoorthy & Gangrade, 2001; Viswanath, 1991). This diverse list of descriptions implies that NGOs can function within multiple organizational cultures and sustain autonomy. Whereas slow turning wheels of government bureaucracy can create gaps between policy formulation and implementation, NGOs can find ways to fill these niches (Das, 2001; Madon & Sahay, 2002; Sooryamoorthy & Gangrade, 2001; Viswanath, 1991). NGOs seek to respond quickly with context specific programs whilst government agencies falter, enabling most NGOs to work directly and closely with poor women. As such they possess a greater ability to understand women’s situational needs. Although these needs have always been prevalent in India, funding deficits have historically inhibited NGOs. Several contemporary funding organizations now favor gender equity which has greatly influenced NGO priorities (Mathiot, 1998). Handy, Kassam, & Ranade (2002) noted that most NGOs share a feminist perspective because many work towards women’s empowerment rather than short-term gains that do not transform society. Most NGOs understand and work to eliminate poverty by providing relevant programs and services. Some adopt higher-level missions and aim to raise awareness and empower women but this strategy is not common. Missions, visions, goals, organizational size, staffing, knowledge, expertise, and funding determine the choice of strategies.

One successful Indian NGO is the Self-employed Women’s Association (SEWA). SEWA is both an acronym and an Indian word meaning service (SEWA, 2001). SEWA’s innovative alternative ideas aim to empower women. Because larger Indian banks refused to service poor women with their minimal incomes, SEWA Bank was formed in response to poor women’s demands (Rose, 1992). In its 2001 annual report, SEWA listed two major goals: (1) To organize women for full employment at the household level, and (2) to help them achieve self-reliance. SEWA’s “integrated approach” provides a range of benefits such as banking, credit, savings, and social security services (p. 8). SEWA has received both national and international recognition because of its efforts to assist socio-economic

development of poor women in India. Poor women with access to credit and savings programs now possess the capacity to increase their income through micro loans that expand their businesses and profits.

Gram-Vikas is a mixed NGO working with both genders. Viswanath (1991) conducted a study of Gram Vikas and another NGO called India Development Service (IDS) to determine their effectiveness in serving the needs of women. Viswanath's study compared the extent to which each NGO provided sustainable economic gains. Gram Vikas' strategies were more focused on short-term gains whilst IDS' strategies were long-term. Although Viswanath recommended that NGOs should adopt the Gram Vikas model, it must be realized that ignorance of long-term needs hinders sustainability and empowerment, and encourages dependency. Education is one approach for sustainability.

Lack of education hinders poor women from realizing their rights, and inhibits access to available resources. Some NGOs offer basic literacy education and formal training programs while others provide knowledge and expertise responding to client needs. Whether acting as relief workers, intermediaries, advocates, or change agents, many NGOs offer some form of formal or informal education to their clients. Improved efforts could increase access to education for poor sectors. However, NGOs work within governmental restrictions – some NGOs may be hesitant to delve into national responsibilities such as the provision of education.

NGO conflicts with the Indian government may have resulted from unfamiliarity regarding the different models used by these different parties. The government has adopted western models of development, whilst most NGOs operate within Indian concepts of self-sufficiency, community, and spiritual growth (Mathiot, 1998). NGOs understand that women's status is a function of socio-cultural discriminations and inept governmental agencies (Mathiot). Working within these two different paradigms can frustrate NGOs, governments, and their clients. NGOs have been known to empathize with client frustrations of government bureaucracy and gain women's trust by working within the cultural contexts while simultaneously pressuring for legal change when opportunities arise. Because NGOs often criticize the state, the government sometimes retaliates with control over NGOs (S. Sen, 1999). Such a love-hate relationship with the government is an interesting aspect of government-NGO relationships. As most NGOs are locally based within their clients' contexts, they possess the capacity to maneuver between local needs and government restrictions. NGOs understand the roots of oppression and how local contexts marginalize and exploit women. For example, NGO workers do not criticize religions but become frustrated with "their distortions and abuse" (Mathiot, p. 32).

Most NGOs function with an understanding that social discrimination creates economic instability of poor women. Unlike governmental departments, most NGO workers within the women's development field are females and reside close to their clients' geographical locations. These workers speak local languages and understand regional differences. This expertise provides NGOs with an important leverage over governmental programs that are more generic. Workers of NGOs observe, hear, and respond to first hand evidence of the women's status. Likewise, poor women reach out to NGOs as a source of hope and support knowing they will be heard with respect. Because most poor women request economic assistance, this also influences NGO responses. NGOs can choose to focus on micro, macro or a combination of issues, all of which are essential for women's socio-economic development. Immediate needs can be satisfied as well as planning for long-term sustainability via training and development while lobbying for change at macro levels of government.

A main disadvantage of Indian governmental agencies is that they are staffed by males; many of whom with patriarchal attitudes. Males are the major decision makers of policies and programs and the main gatekeepers of women's development in India. Governmental efforts of poverty alleviation are frequently unsuccessful, and a major reason might be the lack of understanding of needs of poor women by bureaucratic men.

A collective look at the factors that influence the success of NGOs in serving the needs of poor women in India would include: Alternative approaches, innovative methods, a focus on women's issues, committed leadership, motivated staff and volunteers, faster response rates than government, flexibility, access to national and international funds, context specific programs and services, local offices, and innovative strategies.

The Challenges Confronting NGOs

The very factors that allow NGOs to attain success in serving the needs of poor women – diversity and autonomy – may also be their weaknesses. Sooryamoorthy & Gangrade (2001) observed that although NGOs are initially "highly democratic", as they expand and develop they often drift away from democratic practices (p.152). Sooryamoorthy & Gangrade also noted that institutionalization commonly has detrimental influences on democracy and a spiritual outlook within NGOs. Formal layers of organizational structure can prevent field workers from accessing top leadership (Sooryamoorthy & Gangrade). The proliferation of NGOs in India is no guarantee that they can effectively advocate women's issues or serve the needs of poor women. Not all NGOs succeed regardless of their size or mission. Inexperienced staff, insufficient funds, lack of committed leadership, government bureaucracy,

competition, cultural barriers, and inability to forge linkages outside their area are some causes for failures (Choudhary, 2000; Jha & Mishra, 2000; Madon & Sahay, 2002; Mathiot, 1998; Prasad & Madaan, 2000). For example, Appell (1996) critically questioned whether SEWA is “more ideological than practical” (p. 225). Appell noted several gaps in SEWA’s ideology: SEWA cannot create jobs, it does not assist members in formal sectors, it is not participatory, and middle class workers are in most of the high-level positions in the organization (p. 224).

The effectiveness and growth of NGOs are hotly debated issues. Should they remain small and as a result risk lack of broader impact or sacrifice local connections and opt for organizational growth?

Future Directions for NGOs

Recommendations for future priorities of NGOs vary among authors. Some scholars note the need for motivated leadership (Appell, 1996; Mohan, 1973; Viswanath, 1991). Often, strong leadership of NGOs is not sustained when founding leaders retire, or leave the organization without succession plans and strategies sorely needed to enable smooth leadership transitions. Some organizations grow too large, lose sight of their democratic goals, and traditions dissipate through growth and affects of time, resulting in a loss of touch with client needs. Rapid growth within an NGO can alter advantages of faster response rates, flexibility, and innovation.

Collaboration among NGOs is a common practice in India. (Manzo, 2000; S. Sen, 1999; Yadama, 1997). Yadama described several advantages of collaboration among NGOs: Increasing the effectiveness of smaller NGOs, helping local NGOs to implement regional level programs, building credibility and trust, facilitating effective sharing of technology and information, increasing the power to deal with government bureaucrats, accessing markets for women, and enhancing effective evaluation by local and national funding organizations. However, contrasting views can be found in the literature regarding the benefits of collaborative work among NGOs.

Consensus differs regarding partnerships and growth of NGOs. Brinkerhoff (2003) noted that some partnerships could be counterproductive. Differing ideologies and missions along with conflicts of power and leadership may cripple joint ventures. Das (2001) suggested that NGOs could initiate pilot projects for new schemes. The smaller NGO can take advantage of its flexibility and rapid reaction time to implement such new ideas. To retain this advantage, Das recommended that NGOs could network and share data of valuable expertise. This may be a good solution for those NGOs that prefer to remain small and autonomous. Regardless of which method is used, it is imperative that NGOs remain focused on client needs. NGOs can achieve better success ratios by involving all stakeholders in decision-making and leadership – not just the privileged few at the higher levels of the organization. Micro-strategies are crucial for improvement of the immediate well-being of poor women and must be continued. Macro-strategies are critical for long-term sustainability in the absence of NGOs or other intermediaries. Elimination of one strategy may result in severe neglect of poor women who are often voiceless in the power structures of India. A balanced approach that utilizes both micro and macro-strategies should be considered. Leadership must continually focus on sustainable development that will release poor women from addiction to NGOs to achieve empowerment. (Ebrahim, 2001; P. J. Gandhi, 2000).

Critics argue that patriarchal attitudes infiltrate NGOs and they cite examples of women workers perpetuating the status quo (Carr, Chen, & Jhabvala, 1996; Mathiot, 1998). Many women centered NGOs do not question gender biases in the home. Although India has deep Vedic roots of equity, many Indians have lost sight of this important piece of their history. Additional research on the processes, strategies, and organizational dynamics of NGOs could serve to embellish the practices of NGOs (Manimekalai, 2000; Manzo, 2000; Prasad & Madaan, 2000).

Despite optimistic possibilities for the future of NGOs, they are not immune to the effects of bureaucratic ineptitude. NGOs and the Indian government each play important roles in initiating and enhancing women’s empowerment in India. In due course, most NGOs retreat from each area leaving poor women to fend for themselves until the next aid program comes along. Sustainable development can help women avoid this cycle of dependency and empower them to make their own decisions plus secure their own resources. Therefore, the most important role of NGOs is to act as important links to available resources by bridging the gap between government officials, institutions, aid agencies, and women. NGOs should incorporate empowerment training and development that can assist women in determining strategies to solve their own problems of patriarchy, labor, education, and government access.

Conclusions and Implications for HRD

Diverse cultural and geographical influences produce complex economic participation of women at work (United Nations, 1997). Sentiments regarding women’s economic status vary because of differing conceptual frameworks and insufficient empirical evidence. Understanding how complex factors affect the global workforce and how

leadership works in various contexts can provide important insights to HRD theorists and practitioners. Multinational corporations and business expatriates conducting business in India need to understand regional work practices in various contexts within India (Templer, 2002). India is a vast continent with many states so it is not within the scope of this study to cover all states. The state of Gujarat has been chosen as the focus of this research because the lead author is an Indian female familiar with the Gujarati culture and language.

NGOs must incorporate women-centered strategies in India to benefit disenfranchised poor sectors. Although the Indian government has recognized the effectiveness of women-centered NGOs, Mathiot cautioned practitioners about the “dangers of cooptation” (p.100). Viswanath (1991) recommended that newer NGOs should plan a gradual and cautious approach of development commencing with small local programs leading to a focus on larger issues and extended geographical regions.

The need for contextual common understandings is a frequent refrain in management literature. Viewing organizations through various cultural lenses has been popular since the 1980s (Hofstede, 1991). Hofstede described it as “the psychological assets of an organization” (p.18). Schein (1992) declared that “ultimately, all organizations’ are sociotechnical systems in which the manner of external adaptation and the solution of internal integration problems are interdependent” (p. 68). An NGO’s capacity to focus beyond “reductionist psychological theories of poverty and development” is its primary asset (Mathiot, 1998, p.96). In practice, however, many NGOs may be undermining their potential impacts by perpetuating patriarchal attitudes.

The proliferation of NGOs in India is no guarantee that they advocate women’s issues or succeed in their efforts. Over 95% of the female Indian workforce still labor in unstable informal sectors without benefits or employment security (Mishra, 1998). The Indian government has made slow progress between 1947-1990s by focusing its five-year plans from early issues of welfare and development to current issues of empowerment (Mishra).

One remedial possibility is motivated leadership (Appell, 1996; Mohan, 1973; Viswanath, 1991) vital for NGO success because it reflects the culture and ideologies of the organization. Viswanath (1991) noted the importance of fostering leadership capacity within clients in addition to organizational staff. Fostering “a collective spirit” involves sacrificing personal benefits (p. 165) and deliberately initiating and implementing this goal. Other authors (Manimekalai, 2000; Manzo, 2000; Prasad & Madaan, 2000) recommended research to aid deeper understanding of NGO functions and impacts. Critics disagree about the ideal missions and roles of NGOs. Despite recommendations, NGOs cannot be substitutes for ineffective governmental efforts. Each party is dependent upon the other to initiate and enhance women’s empowerment in India. Interfaces between the public and private organizations are poor (Mishra, 1998). NGOs can aid socio-economic and human capital development by acting as intermediaries on behalf of poor women in India.

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