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# Post-Colonial Feminism in India: Model of Emergent Female Grassroots Leaders in Ahmedabad, Gujarat

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**Abstract:** A qualitative study explored perceptions of poverty alleviation among female grassroots leaders within informal work sectors of Ahmedabad. Post-colonial feminist approaches enabled women to develop and practice their own model of justice. Conclusions include implications for research, scholarship, and practice in the larger context of women's development.

## Problem and Significance

Western and middle-class ideologies hinder empowerment of marginalized females who struggle towards transformation of a patriarchal society. Agar (1980) argues the importance of avoiding the "colonial context" during research (p. 44). Denzin & Lincoln (2003) describe colonial researchers as dominant white males who set out to study "the exotic other, a primitive, nonwhite person from a foreign culture judged to be less civilized than the researcher" (p. 2). To date, policies aimed at poverty alleviation in India have not been successful. Indian women possess the capacity to become important leaders in the effort to alleviate poverty, yet the manner in which they operate and their potential for leadership development have been ignored within mainstream literature.

## Literature and Theoretical Framework

### *Review of Literature*

The review of literature focused upon three major areas: (1) a discussion of socioeconomic development in India that includes the government's attempts at poverty alleviation, India's five-year plans, and recent economic reforms; (2) an overview of recurrent themes affecting the socioeconomic status of low-income women in India; and (3) an analysis of how these recurrent themes influence the priorities of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) for women's development. For an in-depth discussion of these topics see (Razvi & Roth, 2004a) and (Razvi & Roth, 2004b). An understanding of these issues helped to refine the focus of this case study.

### *Theoretical Framework*

An interdisciplinary conceptual framework influenced the examination of complex factors that affect the lives of low-income women in Gujarat: Gandhian ideology of community, self-reliance, and non-violence; feminist theory, and National Human Resource Development (NHRD).

*Gandhian Philosophy.* Indian social reforms for women were initiated by men during the eighteenth century and continued with the inclusion of women during the campaign against British rule. Gandhi believed in the development of the masses and cautioned India not to neglect its laboring classes. By including women in the struggle for national freedom Gandhi wrote about his awareness and respect for gender equality in his autobiography (1983). The Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA) in India is influenced by Gandhi's principles of

*ahimsa* (non-violence), *sarvodaya* (self-help), and *satyagraha* (two words meaning truth and firmness).

*Feminist Theory*. hooks (1984) attributes gender discrimination to race and class that affect women's "quality of life, social status, and lifestyles" (p.4). Low-income women in India suffer gender inequalities that suppress their physical and psychological freedoms. Gedalof (1999) suggests that Indian feminists focus on the "the intersection" of identity factors such as "sex, gender, nation and race" in constructing identity (p. 28). Conducting work within differing contexts produces complexities but it is vital that western feminists create space for Indian "feminist models of self" (p.29). Post-colonial Indian feminists are "redefining national and other community identities" (p.29).

*National Human Resource Development (NHRD)*. Human resource development literature does not include information about informal work sectors in India. NHRD is a relatively new term popularized by McLean (2004) who posits that NHRD has the potential to help alleviate "disparities in wealth, education, employment, health, technology, infrastructures, safety, and other factors that contribute to one's sense of well-being" (p. 3). Debates include the significance of NHRD in developing nations.

### **Methods**

A qualitative study conducted in Ahmedabad, Gujarat during January-May, 2004 explored experiences and perceptions of poverty alleviation among female grassroots leaders at SEWA. SEWA is a social, economic, and political movement that created culturally specific pedagogies and strategies to empower women from multiple trades, classes, castes, and ethnic divisions to promote their social and economic well-being. Multiple sources of data included semi-structured interviews, observations, photographs, artifacts, document reviews, and fieldnotes.

### **Findings**

*Tippey tippey surowar bharai,  
kakraj kakraj par bandhai.  
(Drop by drop a lake is filled,  
Grain by grain, a mountain is formed)*  
[Hansaben reciting a popular poem in Gujarati]

Findings indicate a Model of Emergent Female Grassroots Leaders that describes how low-income women in Gujarat learned to resist and take social action against oppressive practices that hindered women's development and well-being. In so doing, study participants empowered themselves and developed capacities for grassroots leadership.

Complex cognitive, cultural, social, economic, historical, and political factors influenced the emergence of grassroots leaders. Four phases of grassroots leadership development (social disequilibrium, *jagruti*, social transformation, and emergent leaders) comprise the conceptual framework within this model. Intersections among the four phases were complex, fluid, and not strictly sequential, but moving within and through the phases. The model is based upon non-Western perspectives and as such, may not appear familiar to Western audiences as it illustrates the nature, function, and structure of Indian society and how it influences the lives of poor women. Woven within this model are patterns of participants' experiences within low-income sectors, their emergence as grassroots leaders, and their perceived contributions towards poverty alleviation. Below is a summary of the four phases:

### *Social Disequilibrium*

*I was married early because father expired and the brother of stepmother was not a good man...I was 12 at that time. (Shardaben)*

By age 14, Shardaben had become a mother. Poor women in India are deprived of many social, cultural, and political rights that Western women take for granted. Bhatt (1999) argues that as long as women remain powerless, poverty cannot be eradicated. hooks (1984), describes the powerlessness of women “victimized by sexist oppression” rendering them unable “to change their condition in life” (p.1). Like Shardaben, most participants experienced short childhoods due to becoming victims of social maladies that produced a lifetime of adverse consequences. Consequences of gender disparities included persistent inequalities in social participation, poverty, perception of females as social and economic liabilities, oppression, and gender divisions of labor.

Life in such a tenuous environment was challenging for women who labored inside cramped homes with inadequate amenities to wash, cook, clean, and take care of children and elderly relatives. Hansaben, aged 38, lived on a riverbank and recalled her experiences, “Yes it happened. Yes. I had typhoid once....I had malaria....I had vomiting and diarrhea....I was saved from death.” In addition to poor living conditions and low incomes, multiple family obligations further impoverished low-income families. Marriage, dowry, and death expenses were some leading causes of extreme debts that dragged participants into *dukh* (sorrow). Isolated from resources that could uplift their status, women’s development remained stunted, and without capacities to earn adequate incomes, many were treated as social liabilities and victimized with oppressive practices.

Muslim women restricted by *purdah* (seclusion) worked in home-based industries such as incense making and garment sewing. Contractors exploited their disadvantaged status and avoided the minimum wage regulation by providing piece-rate work. Informal sectors exploited women by paying lower wages for identical work conducted by men.

### *Jagruti (Awakening)*

Grassroots leaders described a significant turning point they called *jagruti* (awakening) that motivated women to question existing boundaries and resist oppression. As a result of *jagruti*, women began to explore alternative ways of life and work. For most participants, SEWA membership was an important stepping-stone towards awareness. SEWA’s goals are to organize self-employed women, influence local and national policies, and facilitate social transformation to elevate the perception of informal sectors as a valuable and visible workforce (Raval, 2001).

Awareness profoundly affected participants’ cognition of their current status and the need for solidarity. SEWA membership offered a unique opportunity for a convergence of working women from diverse trades and services. Women joined to discuss their common problems and needs in a female-friendly environment that provided a birthing place for innovative strategies and new paradigms to resolve social issues. Solidarity inspired a powerful collective awakening. By sharing their burdens and strengths, women began to assert their power and demand social justice.

SEWA membership entitles women to a two-day *Charwar Taleem* (movement training). Movement training built awareness of patriarchal attitudes that inhibited women’s development. Critical reflection helped women to value their unpaid household labor and their self-employed

incomes as important contributions to society. Women previously coerced into submission and isolation learned to speak out against oppressive practices:

*What's in a job? They give 1,000, 2,000 or 5,000 wages...but when we get an education that will be our knowledge. (Geetaben)*

Despite the odds, women continued to take incremental steps towards equality, often from one generation to the next, so that their daughters and granddaughters could benefit from their actions. Participants seemed to be intrinsically aware that a 5,000-year-old culture could not be transformed within one short lifetime. With *jagruti*, disenfranchised women found solidarity with like-minded women who used their combined strength to demand equal rights for women. Awakening promoted awareness of women's rights and a sense of self-worth that were critical steps towards empowerment.

### *Social Transformation*

Study participants had worked as volunteer grassroots leaders for many years, ranging from 10 to 35 years. Ruksanaben became a grassroots leader in 1985 and was one of many social activists who believed it was their duty to help *shrumjivi* (troubled) women. SEWA leaders recruit members into the trade union because of their belief in the power of solidarity and the joint commitment required to struggle for empowerment in a male-dominated society. Das (2001) posits that India is experiencing a social revolution.

One effective method for social transformation is grassroots leadership. Study participants shared their experiences as social change agents. Grassroots leaders like Ruksanaben work tirelessly to enlighten and motivate poor women, yet their voices remain silent in mainstream literature.

In every group that we met, there were one or two bright, articulate, defiant young women ready to act as catalysts for a better future,...ready to absorb new ideas. (Bhatt et al, 1988, p.vii)

SEWA discovered the "source of women's leadership" within the ranks of its members (Bhatt, n.d.b., p.8). Women who achieved community respect, trust, and a commitment to service were elected by SEWA members as grassroots leaders. The long road towards social transformation involved learning strategies of civic action for community leadership. Civic action included an understanding of the politics of poverty plus building capacity for situational leadership. Participants described integrated socially-situated learning interventions that used both nonformal and informal methods of leadership development.

Leadership candidates attended an interactive four-day program at SEWA Academy called *Kadam Taleem* (Leadership Training) that was initiated in 1993. *Kadam Taleem* was a culturally relevant pedagogy that enhanced the emergence of grassroots leaders and increased their competencies. Leadership training provided meaningful knowledge for candidates to broaden their understandings of feminist issues by presenting the value of "mass mobilization" (Everett, 1979, p. 195). Ruksanaben stated, "after becoming a leader, I gained more understanding and learned a lot; and the illusion of wealth....I became a little intelligent, right?"

Leadership development enhanced participants' capacities to work at the frontlines of disenfranchised neighborhoods where they were often the first point of contact for isolated women. By making daily contacts with women in their communities, participants kept a constant pulse on current issues and needs of self-employed women. Grassroots leaders sifted through layers of traditional systems to resist, confront, and dissolve oppressive customs that jeopardized the achievement of full employment and self-reliance. SEWA's innovative socially responsible

strategies promoted alternative solutions to chronic socioeconomic problems that infected lower income females.

Participants' strategies of civic action included organizing women into collective social action, resisting oppressive practices, and demanding justice, fair wages, gender equality, and legal protection. Grassroots leaders' efforts were important contributions to the field of women's development.

### *Emergent Leaders*

All but one participant (whose abusive husband restricted her freedom) emerged as effective grassroots leaders. Women from informal sectors were ideal recruits because of their situational knowledge. Middle-class SEWA staff could not relate easily to the needs of self-employed women who shifted their roles in society to emerge as community grassroots leaders. Grassroots leadership brought high visibility and respect in a sector that preferred to underestimate the achievements of women.

Experienced leaders used accumulated situated knowledge combined with leadership strategies to determine when and how to uplift the status of marginalized women. When asked, "Why is there a need for leaders?" Geetaben replied, "because these sisters are still very blind." When asked to describe the impact of leadership in her own life, Manjuben replied, "My mind has realized that I have a legal right to speak. Why should I not speak?"

Grassroots leaders are feminist activists committed to the struggle for improving the status of low-income women. Grassroots leaders strained to help transform self-employed women from invisible margins to the mainstream economy. Empowered leaders empowered others by motivating marginalized women to emulate their success.

### **Conclusions**

The purpose of grassroots leadership at SEWA is to help self-employed women transition from invisible margins into the mainstream economy. Grassroots leaders helped to organize and change perceptions of working women from the middle-class myth of women as housewives and nonworkers towards acceptance as legitimate members of the national workforce.

India is in dire need of labor and educational reforms aimed at women in the informal workforce. Utilizing innovative contextual strategies SEWA proved that poor women are capable of banking, union membership, leadership, and other privileges previously reserved for formal and middle class sectors. As a result, women in Gujarat have begun to develop and practice their own model of justice. Study findings revealed an empirically grounded model of emergent female grassroots leaders that expands knowledge and understanding of contemporary Indian women's issues within non-dominant contexts. Imbedded within this model are four phases that provide insights into women's empowerment: social disequilibrium, *jagruti* (awakening), social transformation, and emergent leaders.

Important implications to adult education are that grassroots leaders developed and used culturally relevant pedagogy to empower self-employed women. A blend of nonformal and informal learning strategies enabled participants to create site-specific leadership strategies to empower women to participate in social transformation. One significant finding was that contrary to existing literature that assumes literacy is an important factor towards women's development, this study revealed that illiteracy was not considered to be a barrier towards leadership if the individual possessed a strong commitment towards community service combined with the ability to learn.

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