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Gender Empowerment and Equality in Rural India: Are Women's Community-Based Enterprises the Way Forward?

By Maria-Costanza Torri¹ and Andrea Martinez²

Abstract

Despite the renewed commitment of the international community to provide economic opportunities for poor women, most observers suggest that the majority of the past and current experience of community enterprise programmes for women has failed to make any significant impact on women's incomes and social empowerment. Based on ethnographic research methods, this paper presents a feminist analysis of a singular women's community enterprise promoted by local NGOs in the state of Tamil Nadu in India, usually known as GMCL (Gram Mooligai Company Limited). GMCL has been promoted by local NGOs in the state of Tamil Nadu and is an example of community women enterprise. Its main purpose is to assess the impact of GMCL on enhancing economical and social empowerment of women in order to better understand the potential of this particular type of initiative in promoting capacity building and local development. The findings show the need to see community enterprise programmes in a much more holistic light than is conventionally understood. Major outcomes of this research include giving voice and visibility to poor women, identifying their preferences and decision-making needs to poverty reduction and finally, developing culturally-sensitive policy recommendations that consider the multiple dimensions of empowerment.

Keywords: gender, community enterprise, empowerment, India

Introduction

In the past few years there has been an increasing surge of interest in ways of increasing women's access to income through community enterprise programmes for women such as producer groups and cooperatives. Despite this, the evidence indicates that the majority of programmes fail to make any significant impact on women's revenue, empowerment and capacity building (Guérin, 2004).

For instance, some of these programmes incorporate social development components with a view to promote change at the grassroots level but have on the whole benefited better-off women. Rather than having a beneficial impact on gender inequalities, they actually tend to increase workloads without increasing access to incomes within the

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household. Moreover, they also cannot be assumed to be of greater benefit than other types of employment programmes to women labourers (Fernando, 2006).

Despite their diversity, gender inequalities compound those of class to make small-scale entrepreneurship even more difficult for poor women than for poor men. The growing literature on women entrepreneurs has found that within the same industries and markets women are generally considerably disadvantaged relative to men and generally have lower incomes. This is particularly the case with female-headed households (Della Giusta and Phillips, 2006).

The intersections of class and gender inequality also raise questions about the degree to which the concept of “entrepreneurship” has been adapted to women’s needs, priorities and beliefs. This can lead to the question whether and how current women-enterprise programmes can or should be changed in order to increase their likelihood of success and to be able to fulfil multiple aims, pertaining economic and social development.

This paper presents evidence from a case study undertaken in 2007 in Southern India, examining a women community enterprise in the herbal sector. GMCL (Gram Mooligai Limited Company) was promoted by local NGOs and based in the Southern state of Tamil Nadu (India). The members of this enterprise are women who belong to *scheduled tribes*, e.g. what are considered to be the ‘untouchables’. GMCL represents an interesting case study for its innovative organizational structure which is different from a cooperative or enterprise: while a cooperative is formed by individual producers that joint together to form a new economic entity, in the case of GMCL different groups/associations of farmers and not individuals joint together. This element confers to GMCL a strong grass-root community dimension. Another innovative aspect of GMCL concerns the outcome of its entrepreneurial activity of its members. As we shall see in this paper, these outcomes are not merely economic but also reach other key aspects of development, such as empowerment and capacity building.

GMCL is also the very first community-based enterprise active in the herbal sector in India which actively involves women belonging to *scheduled tribes*, promoting at the same time their social empowerment, capacity building and income.

The study of women enterprise such as GMCL and the ways in which it operates at grass-root level, could provide lessons for the creation of gender enterprises more participative and inclusive in their approach to women’s needs.

The endeavour of this paper is therefore to identify to what extent the model of this community enterprise is economically and socially viable. The aim of the paper is to analyse also how far this initiative has been translated into an effective process of poverty alleviation for women and in a empowerment process. The empowerment of women will be assessed by the number of facets the GMCL approach addresses (economic, social, psychological). This involves an analysis of the possible changes it brings in terms of women’s individual understanding and collective action, the strength and stability of their organization, the renegotiation of authority it enables at the household and community levels, and the range of objectives it identifies for future action.

Women enterprises, development and empowerment processes: main issues of debate

In recent years the terms “empowerment” have become increasingly salient in community enterprise programmes for women. There are various attempts in the literature to develop a comprehensive understanding of empowerment. The term “*empowerment*” has been used to represent a wide range of concepts and to describe a proliferation of outcomes. Chen (1992) describes “resources, perceptions, relationships, and power,” as the main components of empowerment, and Batliwala (1994), characterizes empowerment as “control over resources and ideology. Resources and agency (in various forms and by various names, e.g., control, awareness, voice, power), are the two most common components of empowerment emphasized in the literature.

The literature contains a range of terms, concepts and data that may be relevant for assessing “empowerment”; for example, various studies have aimed at measuring women’s “autonomy” (e.g. Dyson and Moore 1983; Basu and Basu 1991; Jeebhoy and Sathar 2001), “agency,” “status” (e.g. Gage 1995; Tzannatos 1999), “women’s land rights” (e.g. Quisumbing et al. 1999), “domestic economic power” (e.g. Mason 1998), “bargaining power” (e.g. Beegle et al. 1998; Hoddinott and Haddad 1995; Quisumbing and de la Briere 2000) “power” (e.g. Agarwal 1997; Beegle et al., 1998; Pulerwitz et al. 2000), “patriarchy” (e.g. Malhotra et al. 1995), “gender equality” (World Bank 2001a & 2000b). Often there is no clear demarcation between these terms. Notwithstanding the similarities in the concepts underlying many of these terms, the concept of empowerment can be distinguished from others based on its unique definitional elements.

The first essential element of empowerment is that it is a process (Kabeer 2001; Chen 1992; Rowlands 1995, Oxaal and Baden 1997). None of the other concepts explicitly encompasses a progression from one state (gender inequality) to another (gender equality). Much of the emphasis on empowerment as a process is found in the conceptual literature, but this understanding is also beginning to be incorporated into the frameworks of empirical studies. For example, even as Jeebhoy (2000) considers autonomy and empowerment to be fairly similar, she argues that the former is a static state—and thus measurable by most available indicators—while the latter is change over time, and not so easily measurable. Kabeer’s (2001) understanding of “choice” comprises three inter-related components: “resources, which form the conditions under which choices are made; agency, which is at the heart of the process through which choices are made, and achievements, which are the outcomes of choices.”

The second element of empowerment that distinguishes it from other concepts is agency—in other words, women themselves must be significant actors in the process of change that is being described or measured (G. Sen 1993; Mehra 1997). Drawing mainly from the human rights and feminist perspectives, many definitions contain the idea that a fundamental shift in perceptions, or “inner transformation,” is essential to the formulation of choices. That is, women should be able to define self interest and choice, and consider themselves as not only able, but entitled to make choices (Kabeer 2001; Nussbaum 2000). Kabeer (2001) goes a step further and describes this process in terms of “thinking outside the system” and challenging the status quo.

Attempts to increase women’s participation in economic domain are not new. At independence some new national governments were concerned about issues of female poverty and/or harnessing their time and skills for economic development. This led to the

introduction of women's training courses and programmes for women's co-operative development in a number of countries in the 1950s and 1960s. Such programmes also often found support from international development agencies, particularly where they were seen as contributing to family welfare and child health.

In the mid-1970s to early 1980s there was a sudden surge of interest in ways of increasing women's access to income. On the one hand this coincided with a growing interest in the potential of the newly identified informal sector, as both a contributor to economic growth and a means of targeted poverty alleviation and employment creation. On the other hand, the start of the United Nations Decade for Women (1976-1985) focused attention on women's ability to earn an income as a necessary element of household poverty alleviation and a pre-condition to gender equity. This led to the initiation or intensification of extensive research programmes on women's work and position (Johnson, 2005; Narayan, 2000). Literature emphasized the efficiency effects of integrating women in development programmes and the costs of not doing so (Martinez, 2009).

Although there continued to be widespread diversion of funding for women's economic activities towards traditional welfare projects, there has been in these last few years a rapidly increasing number of women's income generation programmes and projects in many countries (Della Giusta and Phillips, 2006). These have included both projects and programmes targeted specifically to women and attempts to increase women's participation in large male stream programmes.

Although there were some exceptions, a number of features commonly have characterized these interventions for women. Firstly, they have aimed to increase household income mainly through providing women with supplementary, part-time work which could be combined with their domestic work. Secondly they have built on women's traditional skills or what were perceived as "feminine skills" in handicrafts and food processing. Thirdly, they have often combined both economic and social objectives. In most cases the focus was on the formation of separate women's groups and in some cases income from production was used for community or welfare activities.

According to these development programmes for women, enterprise development is seen as a particularly important development intervention for women because of their existing high levels of participation in the small-scale sector. Stimulating female entrepreneurship is seen as having important "trickle down" effects on wider poverty alleviation and gender inequality through the expansion of female employment and stimulation of the local economy (Chitsike, 2000; Brush, 2006).

Recent formulations of the market approach are characterized by a number of basic features related to the wider neo-liberal policy framework of the organizations promoting this approach (Hofmann and Marius-Gnanou, 2005). First, the main aim of micro-enterprise development for women is seen as stimulating individual female entrepreneurship following their male counterparts, thus "integrating" women into the economic growth process. Entrepreneurs are assumed to be autonomous individuals (or at most partners and very small groups) who perform a range of functions.

Nevertheless, this approach has been object of several critics. First, the economic emphasis fails to reflect the very diverse aims and requirements of women entrepreneurs (Kantor, 2003; Fernando, 2006). The analysis of entrepreneurship in terms of high growth and low growth enterprises fails to capture the multiple aims and requirements of

women themselves. Many of the assumptions underlying these programmes did not accurately reflect the situation of poor female entrepreneurs. For many women, it may not be so much overall increases in income which are important, but the security of such income and the degree to which they can control it (Hofmann and Marius-Gnanou, 2005). Although some of the potential implications of women's distinctive strategies have been considered in evaluations of micro-enterprise programmes, recommendations have been limited to modification of the economic factors taken into account (e.g. widening the unit of analysis to include women's multiple enterprises) rather than a questioning of the economic framework itself (Mayoux, 2006, Liedholm, 2002). This still fails to cover other possible aims which women may have reduction of work time, improvement of their control over income, integration with non-market survival activities, etc.

Second, as a result of the economic, technical and quantitative biases in policy, there is little consideration of the need for changes in power relations or gender inequality in either analysis or policy. Despite the fact that gender inequalities are in themselves identified as fundamental constraints on female entrepreneurship, they actually receive very little attention in policy recommendations (Minniti et al., 2005). The only concrete policy measures proposed are the provision of micro-level services for women to facilitate their dual role rather than looking at ways of changing macro-level welfare policy or inequalities of responsibility between women and men (Kabeer, 2005; Watson and Dunford, 2006). Even the inclusion of gender-awareness and conscientization in some programmes is unlikely to succeed without considerable institutional back-up. Where this is not the case these programmes merely exacerbate the tendency to put the blame for failure on women themselves.

Women's own aspirations and needs are complex, and often contradictory. Their immediate need for an income can in many cases only be fulfilled by challenging entrenched inequalities of which they may be only partially aware and which they may be ill-equipped to challenge, even with the support of development agencies (McKean, 1989, Cheston, 2006, Kabeer, 2005). The more conventional types of projects have often failed because, in their response to women's immediate needs, they have failed to address longer term underlying constraints. Because of the potential costs of participation to poor women, the definition even of these immediate needs in terms of types of work and work organization has been biased towards the better-off among the poor.

An alternative entrepreneurial model for women? The case study of GMCL (Gram Mooligai Company Limited)

GMCL (*Gram Mooligai Company*) is an Indian enterprise active in the herbal sector since 2000. It supplies medicinal herbs to pharmaceutical enterprises (Himalaya Drug Company, Natural Remedies, Ompharma etc.) playing an intermediary role between these companies and the local farmers and commercialises ayurvedic medicines produced by local communities under the brand of "*Village Herbs*". Although GMCL has not been active for a long time, this initiative seems to have potential from a financial point of view: GMCL had a turnover of \$140,000 in 2005-2006 and a turnover of \$180,000 in 2008. While it is still financially small, it contributes an average of \$90 annually to the livelihoods of some 1300 families in Karnataka and Tamil Nadu.

GMCL was established by a network of Indian NGOs. In particular, FRLHT (Foundation for the Revitalization of Local Health Traditions) and CCD (Covenant

Centre for Development) have played a relevant role in the set up of this women's enterprise. FRLHT is a think-tank that is focused on education and has a technical expertise in botanic, while CCD is an Indian NGO mostly concerned with rural development.

GMCL is an attempt at developing participatory management for poor women. The shareholding of the company is represented by the cultivators and gatherers of medicinal plants that are organised into local groups called *Sanghas*³. The number of *Sanghas* which are part of GMCL are in total 72, distributed in 80 villages in Karnataka and Tamil Nadu.

GMCL presents a formally established and agreed decision-making structure where all problems connected with the running of the enterprise (for example raw material supplies and prices, technical and managerial problems, wage levels etc.) are discussed at regular meetings of an elected board of directors composed of both managers and representatives of *Sanghas*. These latter are elected among the members of the *Sanghas*.

GMCL plays the role of a marketing/commercial entity. Its main functions are liaising, selling the raw material and negotiating the commercial conditions with pharmaceutical sector and expanding the market share for the final product. The *Sanghas*, which constitute the grassroots organisational base of this enterprise, regroups the village gatherers and farmers and have the function of coordinating their activities (collection, harvesting, cleaning, drying, weighting etc.).

CCD, a local NGO is the liaison between GMCL and the local communities. The role of CCD is the one of facilitator and action catalyst. This role is complex and involves the *organizational* dimension (facilitating the constitution of *Sanghas* and their coordination), the *communication* dimension (facilitating the flux of information between the different levels of the organization) and the *capacity building* dimension (facilitating the acquisition of knowledge and know-how and spread of information inside the *Sanghas*).

Methodology

Data come from individual and group interviews as well as from participative observation. The field study was carried out in Tamil Nadu (districts of Dindugal and Virudhanagar Ramanad) between June and August 2008. Twenty-two households of *Sanghas* farmers and of sales representatives was selected on the base of parameters such as age, marital status and average budget available at household level. The interviewees were aged between 21 and 55 years and all belonged to the *scheduled tribes*. The interviews consisted of structured and semi-structured components. Structured questions aimed to collect quantitative data (income from the participation to commercial activities and total household budget) while semi-structured questions aimed to gain insights on the process of empowerment and capacity building of the GMCL members. Two group interviews consisting of 10 participants each were also organized. The selected villagers were women who belonged to the *Sanghas* but who had not been previously interviewed.

³ "Sangha" is a Sanskrit word that can be translated roughly as "association" or "assembly" "company" or "community" with common goal, vision or purpose.

Four local translators belonging to the same caste of the interviewees have been hired. Two of them were field workers with previous professional experience among Tamil speaking villagers.

In order to minimize the difficulties that may arise when a male interpreter approaches women, all the translators were female. The interviews were recorded and subsequently transcribed in Tamil language and in English. In order to triangulate the data, the version in Tamil were compared with the English version.

A form of women entrepreneurship at the grass-root level: the Sanghas

The *Sanghas* are village organizations composed of maximum 20 members. A group size of not more than 20 members is suggested as ideal for forging solidarity among members and for effective monitoring of their performance. The benefits of being a member of the *Sangha* consist of pursuit of group enterprise activities: the *Sanghas* have the function of coordinating the activities of the farmers belonging to GMCL. These activities consist of collection, harvesting, cleaning, drying weighting of the raw herbs and include also the mobilisation of savings. Another important objective of the *Sanghas* is to build the self-help capabilities of the rural poor. Income generating activities are promoted either as a group or as individuals by providing microcredit and giving technical guidance, so that poor families are brought above the poverty line.

The success and the creation of self-help groups (SHGs) in India is very high: the number of these groups is estimated to be more than a million. These village organizations involve more than 120 millions of people, 90% of whom are women (Hofmann and Marius-Gnanou, 2007). The difference with other microcredit organizations is represented by the fact that the SHGs provide the members with many more services on the top of microcredit (scolarisation, health services etc...).

A *Sangha* is conceptually targeted to weaker sections: its members are exclusively women. This target has been selected as the activity of gathering is predominantly undertaken by women. The herb gatherers and farmers involved with GMCL belong mainly to *scheduled tribes* such as *Servar*, *Konar*, *Rettiyar* and *Naiyakkar*. In general, *scheduled tribes* families constitute the most vulnerable and economically the most backward among the different communities. These tribal communities are predominantly landless. Only a marginal part of these household possess small parcels (with an average size which varies between 2 and 5 acres). Among the families who possess land, the marginal holdings predominate.

The *Sangha* under the facilitation of CCD makes a procurement potential assessment survey every year on a fixed month to assess its own supplying capacity for each medicinal plant species through the participating group members and gets a consolidated procurement potential assessment for the year. Periodic field visits are made to ensure the adherence of suggested farming measures by the members. The quantity produced or collected by every member is decided on collective base inside the *Sangha*. This aspect seems to be a sensitive issue, as it can possibly lead to conflicts inside the *Sangha*. Indeed, generally the villagers have as objective the increase in collection or production of herbs: a larger supply corresponds to a larger income. This can sometimes clash with the interests of other members of the *Sangha* who also wish to increase their supply to GMCL.

Conflicts resolution mechanisms are established and the mediation role of CCD field coordinators is requested in case of disputes. When GMCL gets a firm order from a buyer, it offers to buy the specified medicinal herbs from the members of the group at 70% of the negotiated price value of the buyer industry and requests the *Sanghas* to send samples of material to be collected, in case the groups are willing to accept the offer. GMCL offers to buy the produce at a predetermined price at the time of the harvest, subject to quality and quantity conditions.

This aspect is particularly important as the market of herbal sector is characterized by price fluctuations due to the seasonality of the supply. The villagers can therefore benefit from an assurance that the quantity that they procure will be purchased at an agreed price.

Empowering women through Sanghas?

Kabeer (2001) offers a useful definition of empowerment that can be applied across the range of contexts that development assistance is concerned with: "*The expansion in people's ability to make strategic life choices in a context where this ability was previously denied to them.*" We employ this definition as a reference point in the present paper. Although brief, this definition is specific enough to distinguish it from the general concept of "power," as exercised by dominant individuals or groups. Kabeer's definition is especially attractive because it contains two elements which help distinguish empowerment from other closely related concepts, as discussed in the first part of this paper: firstly the idea of process, or change from a condition of disempowerment, and secondly that of human agency and choice, which she qualifies by saying that empowerment implies "choices made from the vantage point of real alternatives" and without "punishingly high costs".

In the present context, empowerment may be defined ideally as a process that people undergo, which eventually leads to changes. Nelly Stromquist (1995), for instance, defines empowerment as "*a process to change the distribution of power both in interpersonal relations and in institutions throughout society*" describes it as "*a process of acquiring, providing, bestowing the resources and the means or enabling the access to a control over such means and resources*". Given the above, the term is therefore more relevant to the marginalized groups such as the women belonging to the indigenous communities.

Within the *Sanghas* approach, empowerment is embedded at many levels. The impact of *Sanghas* on the various dimensions of women empowerment depends on the backwardness, prevailing cultural practices, and demographic profile of the area. Gender inequalities are all-pervasive, forming much of the unquestioned backdrop of everyday social interaction in many rural societies (Kantor, 2002; Liedholm, 2002). Women's social status is generally defined by their relation to men. Women are seen, both in custom and formal legal systems, as the dependants of men and are subject to their authority as fathers, husbands, brothers and community leaders. Access to family and community productive resources is generally differentiated by gendered patterns of inheritance and usage (Palier, 2002).

Furthermore, the gender division of labour assigns women to productive tasks which are generally of lower status than those of men and receive lower levels of remuneration (Lelart, 2001; Charlier, 2005). Many productive tasks are performed on the

basis of a gender (and age) division of labour within the household. This commonly means that men are responsible for the more prestigious tasks, and those involving outside contacts and exchanges of money, while women and children are helpers performing much of the routine and low status work. This division of labour is further reinforced by women's lack of independent access to productive resources noted above. Women are responsible for most of the unpaid tasks in reproduction as well as production. This severely hampers their access to income and their time for any activities outside the household. It also restricts their access to skills which are not connected with their domestic role.

Constraints posed by poverty and gender inequality thus operate on many levels, and often mutually reinforce each other to seriously limit the options open for poor women (Evers and Walters, 2000).

Economic empowerment

Women's ability to save and access to bigger income would give them an economic role not only within the household but, may be, outside it as well (Liedholm, 2002; Servet, 2006). In reference to the raw herbs, the gatherers interviewed stressed how the association with GMCL has allowed them to get better prices from those offered previously by local traders. In the past the villagers pointed out that they had to bear costs of transporting the raw material to the local market. Price fluctuation was a major problem, so that the gathering activity was not profitable for them.

A 40 years old woman from the village of Palavanatham recalls the past:

“Before becoming a member of GMCL, I had to trudge to the towns of Madurai to sell the herbs that I had collected. It was quite a long journey, around 50 Km from my village and I had to go by bus. This was quite expensive. The traders were never satisfied with the quality of my product and used to pay me very little...”

The villagers emphasized how previously the presence of middlemen was reducing their gains from the sale of raw material. The increase of selling price for the gatherers is on average around 30%.

The members of some *Sanghas* still supply few species of plants to the local traders. Nevertheless, their negotiation capacity is increased since when they have become associated with GMCL. A villager from Kurayur explains:

“We supply 5 herbs species to GMCL. After we have decided to be associated with GMCL, some traders still come to my village and ask us to sell them some herb species. We say that we are not interested, that we have already a commitment with GMCL. They usually insist, some of them are ready to offer even a higher price than the one we currently get”.

As the finished products are being sold through sales representatives who get a trade commission of 35% on their sales, GMCL has been able to provide the women with an additional form of income. The sales representatives interviewed affirm that the profit

on their sales amounts to 20-25%. In tourist places such as B. R. Hills or in rural towns such as Sante Marally, the sales amount to an average of 2000-3000 Rs per month.

A sale representative from the village of Sante Marally affirms:

“Earlier I used to earn around 200-300 Rs everyday. But now I earn up to 1000 Rs and sometimes, even 5000 Rs to 10,000 Rs everyday. Further I can also save more now. I am also able to take care of my parents who stay with me. I also give some money to my son”.

In order to examine the economic impact of GMCL, the income generated from taking part in GMCL activity was collated with the total monthly family income. The contribution of GMCL income to total family income is found to be significant indicating the positive impact of the strategy. In spite of the tendency among beneficiaries to underreport income, most of them stated to have generated a monthly income ranging from Rs 1500 to Rs 2000. After the intervention of GMCL, the villagers are able to increase their savings as a consequence of the reduction of expenditures for medicines. A sales representative affirms:

“if someone has cough I gave her the sugam syrup. If she approaches an allopathic doctor for the same problem, she would have to shell out much money for her consultation. But if she comes to us, they can directly get treated for their problem without wasting much money, especially for older women because the Government hospital is 3 km away”. The advantage of reducing the expenditures in the household for the purchase of medicine is also emphasized by another sale representative from Maddur. She affirms: *“the problem is that we need to pay 20 Rs to the doctor to get a drug worth 2 Rs. By coming to us, people get free advice and they have to spend money only for the medicine. Further, this venture is not illegal because the medicines are all over-the-counter ones”.*

This company, in synergy with other local organizations (such as a micro credit organization called the *Kalasam*) can be the starting point to promote other forms of entrepreneurship at village level.

The increase of the revenue at household level made possible by GMCL activity has enhanced the saving habit among villagers. This can encourage them to use their financial resources in starting up small business activities on which they can fall back during difficult times. This could be also done through the support of village micro credit institutions. Some sales representatives such as Rajeswari, who have been able to start up their own business activity, represent an example of the reinforcement of local entrepreneurship. Rajeswari is a young woman in her thirties from a small hamlet close to Sante Marally (Karnataka). Since the past 4 years she has been working full time as a sale representative for GMCL products and she has opened a petty shop in Sante Marally. As her income is on the increase, she is planning to open a bigger medical shop in the next future.

One third of the women interviewed, especially the young ones, have expressed their interest in opening their own medical shop in the future. However, in the

Utchanendal village a member of the local *Sangha* pointed out that the sales of GMCL medicines by the sales representatives find the resistance of other members in the village community, especially those belonging to higher castes. The sale of medicines is hindered by the lower social status of sales representatives: the villagers belonging to higher castes are in some cases unwilling to purchase medicines or interact with them due to their inferior status. This can vary from a village to another, based on the differences in social structure that characterize the village communities.

It is important to point out that this increase in household income does not mean automatically an increased capacity for women to decide its allocation between the different expenses. Women generally only control income with male permission, which may be withdrawn. Women's own cash earnings are often incorporated into these existing patterns of resource allocation rather than radically transforming them. Although women may control some of their own earned income, this is widely variable between cultures, within cultures between different social groups, and even between households within the same family (Perrenas, 2000; Mandakini, 2000).

Social empowerment

The GMCL model has been successful in producing inside the villagers wider socio-economic outcomes than only economic benefits. This includes an enhanced a ***social empowerment process*** for women, notably through the improvement of social status of herbs gatherers who are generally landless or marginal farmers and of sales representatives in the villages. The process of empowerment has had as a result a better access to power and resources at community and household level and the creation of women's institutions (*Sanghas* and other informal meeting groups). For the women, participation in and the decision to be active in the *Sanghas* has often been the first gateway to be crossed and their first empowered step. The fact of taking part in harvesting and commercial activities has undoubtedly enhanced the skills and position of those women who are most active. These women are often able to use the need to travel to meetings and for marketing as a means of breaking previous restrictions on their movements outside the home and to develop a range contacts outside their immediate family and community.

Nevertheless, for most women this process has not been easy. In many rural societies, attempts to control women's movements outside the home further constrain their autonomy.

A *Sangha* woman in the village of Perunguri recalls "*my husband told me to stay at home and look after the housework, in stead of going and gossiping. If I was late in cooking his dinner after a meeting, I was beaten.*" As the women that participate in GMCL initiative are poor and belong to the lower castes, the pressures at home were further exacerbated by the fact that they were mobile in spaces traditionally reserved for men and in many cases for upper caste men only. In the initial days, *Sanghas* meetings were hesitantly organized inside members' homes with the fear of reprimand. From inside homes, the women slowly moved out to gather in the *thinnai* (porch), or even in the local temple. Then it became a common sight to see the women conduct their meetings and other proceedings in the community's public place, the '*Chavady*' of the village. A woman from Perunguri who is a selling representative in her village, says that since she has successfully established her petty shop to sale GMCL products, she is

invited to the local Panchayat to give speeches about Ayurveda and traditional remedies. This has increased her reputation inside the community. This woman affirms:

“before becoming a sale representative, I was afraid of talking in front of other people. I was afraid of leaving my house. Now my confidence has increased. Recently I have been asked by the Panchayat members to talk about the products I am selling and to explain the side effects of Allopathy. I would have never thought of being capable of doing that..”

The groups have provided a forum for women to express their concerns and articulate their aspirations for change (power within and power with) and enabled them to see and know what is happening outside the house. Several groups have become centres for initiating social action against the dowry system, alcoholism, illiteracy, and divorce. Though some groups have succeeded in improving the extent and levels of political participation of the members, women’s active and effective involvement in local planning and decision-making is yet to take place. In spite of several drawbacks, members unanimously expressed the view that some improvement in their livelihood had taken place as a result of their increased confidence and ability to cope with difficulties.

Involvement in cultural activities can go a long way to liberate women from their traditional roles. Their active participation in *Sanghas* has improved their confidence and created an opportunity for its members to meet members of other village organizations. Active participation in sports and cultural activities, construction of roads and help extended to the sick and the disabled show their better willingness for mutual help and greater commitment to social obligations. The efforts made by some groups in initiating public campaigns against illicit liquor and gambling are worth mentioning.

The extent of empowerment varied with each aspect examined. For example, one third of them felt that their self-confidence had increased considerably. The groups’ dynamics enhanced their pride particularly since they were able to generate income from the economic activities taken up by them after joining the groups. About half of the selected members agreed that their communication skills have improved significantly after joining the groups; but most of them happen to be group leaders. They strongly agree that they can now participate in non-family meetings, interact effectively in the public sphere, and enjoyed better mobility. The example of the small contribution made by members of *Sanghas* out of their limited incomes for the construction of a house for an old destitute widow shows the change that had come about in their social outlook. It is thus evident that empowerment in terms of social outlook has been fairly remarkable.

A range of training programs for women have been organized by CCD and another NGO, the FRLHT (Foundation for the Revitalization of Local Health Traditions). These activities, carried out in conjunction with local healers and village botanists, involved training on issues such as processing and marketing of herbal drugs, value addition activities and sustainable harvesting and collecting techniques for medicinal plants. Savings/credit provision and improvements in marketing skills and networks as also been an area of strategic importance in training as has increased women’s capacity of selling and therefore their income.

Discussion and Analysis

The interviews and field observations have reported that there are certain elements/factors, which are crucial for the successful functioning of *Sanghas*. The major factors may be categorised into external and internal. The *internal factors* contributing to group success include the homogeneity in membership (members belonging to same income or social strata), the presence of democratic and transparent functioning mechanisms and the presence of a dynamic leadership.

The *Sanghas*, the organisational base of GMCL, are small informal associations created for the purpose of enabling members to reap economic benefit out of mutual help, solidarity, and joint responsibility. Resolving internal tensions requires considerable skill by members of the *Sanghas* and CCD field workers. The field observations suggest that some smaller groups manage to overcome these tensions. Besides, smaller size facilitates the decision-making process among the members.

The joint liability not only improves group members' coordination and productivity but also creates mechanisms of cooperation and reinforcement of community ownership, which is a prerequisite of GMCL. The *Sangha*, being a grass-root organization, encourages the women to come together, to analyse their issues and problems and to fulfil their needs in a participative approach. As a local association, the *Sanghas* form a privileged place for information and knowledge sharing and for the strengthening of social linkages among the members (Haubert, 1997). The practice of holding regular group meetings is found to build better understanding, forge solidarity, and develop qualities of self-help and mutual help among the members.

Nevertheless, not always the *Sanghas* has proved to be successful in the pursuit of GMCL objectives. In the village of Kallupathy, the *Sanghas* failed to enable members to realise their potential benefits. The reasons identified for the failure were the presence of misconceptions about *Sanghas* goals both among the team and the members and lack of clarity about the concept of the *Sangha*. The main lessons drawn from this case is the need for creating *Sanghas* based on a clear assessment of the needs of different groups of women based on the criteria of age and socioeconomic conditions, ensuring clear understanding of the concept of *Sanghas* among team members involved in promoting *Sanghas*, and enhancing the relevance of *Sanghas* to their members by enabling them to meet effectively their requirements, in terms of amount of time necessary to carry out the shared activities and personal responsibilities.

From the field observations of different *Sanghas* in the study area it results that the factors affecting group dynamics and group functioning have been mainly the feeling of solidarity and pervasive benefits from group formation, increased awareness of group members, self reliance, and transparency. The feasibility of *Sanghas*'s development is uncertain where such resources, enthusiasm and altruism do not exist. While considering the internal factors contributing to group's success, groupwise variations were not observed – almost the majority of the members, irrespective of groups, remarked that good leadership, co-operation among members, and transparency in decision-making are essential for the smooth functioning and sustainability of the group. However, members felt that the role of the group leader is one among the foremost factors responsible for a group's success or failure. In some of the defunct groups, absence of a strong secretary to inculcate in the members the real spirit of group dynamics had led to its failure.

The study case shows that the presence of local leaders can be another decisive element for the promotion and the success of *Sanghas*. In many villages, the role of leaders has been essential in facilitating women mobilisation and catalysing collective action within local communities. On the other hand, distrust in the leaders, lack of transparency in transactions, and autocratic style of function of the leadership were identified as the major factors inimical to the success of some groups in the long run. Also, instability in leadership in the initial years may lead to the failure of groups. It has been found that when efficient and dynamic leaders leave a group, it collapses. Overdependence on leaders is found among members of some *Sanghas*. This system of spoonfeeding cannot be considered a positive sign; a strategy of gradual and slow withdrawal of the helping hand of the leader seems to be the ideal mechanism for making the groups self-reliant.

Regarding the *external factors* which contributed to the success of GMCL, from the interviews carried out with the farmers, it has been emphasized that the role of the promoting agency, such as CCD, and the field co-ordinator have played in particular an important role. Deliberate external intervention by committed and sincere staff is essential to give shape to, nurture, and empower the groups. The role of the promoting agency is not confined to mere mobilisation of rural women folk. The agency is also expected to inculcate in them a spirit of self-help and mutual help and a profound understanding of the mission and goals of the *Sanghas* groups cannot be built overnight. Group formation is a slow, time-consuming process. Once the members get the crux of the mission and realise the benefits, they would remain loyal throughout and never leave the group. When the group becomes stabilised in its functioning, internal factors like good leadership, unity, and mutual understanding among the members determine the pace of growth and development. The majority of the *Sangha* members interviewed felt that CCD and the co-ordinators had a crucial role in the initial years till the groups reach the stage of self-sufficiency. Their help may be needed in various stages and at all times of community activity for finding solutions to the problems which the groups would face. It was found that the more educated the members were, the less is the intervention required by co-ordinators and organisers. Also, the more backward an area the greater is the intervention required. Group formation was rushed through at least in some groups with inadequate preparation of the participants and clarity about the goals. This is evident from the fact that in inactive groups, members were found to have left the group after a short time. The enthusiasm shown in newly-formed groups was lost at least by some members in about two to three years of functioning.

With reference to the results in the GMCL approach, women's development through income generation is seen as a process whereby they can attain gradual control over resources and production processes. Recognizing the multi-dimensionality of poverty, the GMCL approach puts emphasis on holistic strategies. There is a greater emphasis on structural inequality rather than individual behaviour as factors influencing incomes. The task is therefore seen not so much as one of addressing low incomes at the individual level, but the formation of groups and associations of poor women for mutual support in production and to pressure for change in wider inequalities.

In relation to the economic development process promoted by GMCL, we can observe that this community based enterprise has played an important economic role such as supporting the development of skills aimed at enhancing women's productive

capability; promoting women's control in the management and marketing of the enterprise; providing access to new financing opportunities for women and helping women control and own cash and the means of production. In the GMCL approach, the development of women is a combination of changes in their personal and public life at socio-economic and cultural levels. It is important to emphasize that the results of this form of development intervention are not just limited to economic consideration but also entail some important social aspects. These aspects pertain to the enhancement of women's training and education, the increase of awareness among women about gender inequalities, the strengthening of local women's organizations and their networking capacities at different levels. The development of leadership skills amongst women and the increased access to decision-making processes have been other important outcomes.

The most striking observation was that a vast majority realised the need and significance of mutual help and co-operation. Their social outlook changed considerably after joining the *Sanghas*.

Stepping outside the home and participating in some form of collective undertaking that can be successful, has helped in developing a sense of independence and competence among the women in both leadership and membership tasks. In this respect, the creation of a small, cohesive group such as the *Sangha*, with which its members may identify closely is paramount. Being part of a *Sangha* has widened the women sense of identity. Membership to the *Sangha* belongs to the women independently. The women got together on an equal footing. The emotion associated from participation in the *Sangha* is effectively expressed by a woman who states: "*being a member of the Sangha is like being in my maternal home*". Organizational theory and empirical evidence support the notion that knowledge is socially constructed. A process of mobilization and collective action develops a shared cognitive system and shared memories. These forms of organizational cognition, which call for the understanding of events, open the opportunity for social interpretation as well as the development of relatively dense interpersonal networks for sharing and evaluating the information, thus creating e effective learning systems.

Organizational learning can be relatively low level or single loop, involving only minor adjustments and fine tuning of existing organisational images and maps. Conversely, it can be reflected in the alteration of existing norms, assumptions, and values that govern action. Such learning is referred to as high-level or double-loop learning (Cousins and Earl, 1992, p. 401). This collective learning, which draws upon the theory of social learning of Albert Bandura, has been argued to be one of the greatest benefits from participatory evaluations in education (Cousins and Earl, 1992). In my view, the rationale of learning that occurs in women's groups is the same. In-depth interpretive analysis shows women's capabilities in *Sanghas* to creative *social learning processes*.

Social learning has been an effective strategy to bridge women entrepreneurs' technical and managerial capabilities enhance their self-confidence and organizing potential to advance their interest and effect social change. One such promising and potentially transformative change concerns their variable, yet important contribution to education provision, youth entrepreneurial apprenticeship, and girls' education. *Sanghas* have been effective in improving the levels of knowledge and skill of the rural folk through informal education and programmes to enhance the capacity-building of women.

The GMCL case study also shows that empowerment processes in gender entrepreneurial activities is facilitated by a mode of conceiving the economic activity close to the women's everyday experiences and if it builds upon the intellectual, emotional, and cultural resources the participants bring to their social space. In the GMCL approach, there is a clear focus upon knowing the experiences of the women in their everyday life; there is an equally strong focus on making those experiences collective through taking part to the same economic activities. This discussion of everyday life has a number of consequences. When women talk to other women about their personal experiences, they validate it and construct a new reality. When women describe their own experiences, they discover their role as agents in their own world and also start establishing connections between their realities. It should be clear that the discussion of personal lives, of needs, necessitates of a friendly, receptive social space. The fact that these village organizations, such as *Sanghas* are created on the basis of collectively owned cultural and social endowment facilitates the creation of solidarity among community members and receptivity to collective action. Granovetter (1985) with the notion of *embeddedness* underlines how the economic actions of individuals are always imbedded in social networks. A woman from Minitankulam village affirms: "*It is good to be a member of the Sangha.. This helped me to meet other women of the village. We share our problems and we support each other. If someone is in need, or if I am in need, I know that I can rely on them and they know that they can rely on me. This is mutual*". The establishment of these community networks, which are the result of these community organizations, has allowed resources to be pooled, actions to be coordinated and safety nets to be created in order to reduce risks for community members (Bourdieu, 1997; Putnam, 1973). One important element of a community enterprise such as GMCL lies in its capacity to combine the economic and social aspects of entrepreneurship activity, which represents a salient element characterizing women enterprises in developing countries. Social capital is a community's major resource (Bourdieu, 1997). The process of empowerment, which is a result of their involvement with GMCL, can therefore foster other entrepreneurial initiatives inside the village community. As a woman from Kulayur village affirms:

" I am a member of the local Sangha. This has helped me a great deal to increase the faith in my own capabilities and in the ones of my group. Our work has been fruitful. We have had good results in the Sangha and we continuously supply to GMCL several species o plants. The quality of our supply has always been considered good...I have decided to start up a little activity with other women of the village. We will produce baskets and sell them locally".

In this process, the role of CCD field coordinators as group facilitator has been important: These latter, it has already being pointed out, have been able to promote a participatory process which provides constant encouragement and support to the members. The GMCL study case shows that the process of empowerment attained locally by the women, has been achieved gradually. The positive results of women economic activity take place only when the *Sanghas* become consolidated and socially sustainable in the long term. The extent of empowerment varies with the age of the group. Members

in older groups show a high degree of social and psychological empowerment than their counterparts in infant groups.

Nevertheless GMCL study case shows that participation should not be considered an indicator of success of gender enterprises in achieving women's empowerment. The reasons for women's high and increasing levels of participation in GMCL are diverse. Individual women may have competing and in some senses conflicting motivations for increasing their levels of participation in market activities and taking part to a community-based enterprise such as GMCL. The majority of women interviewed have emphasized the need to increase their family revenue by becoming sales representatives or by taking part to the collection of raw herbs. Decreasing opportunities for men to earn a "family wage" mean that many households are now no longer able to meet their needs from male wages alone. In many cases male expectations that women will contribute to the family income pool have increased. Evidence also suggests that the numbers of female-headed households where women are forced to take up a wage income have risen (Brush, 2006). These women are being pushed into whatever market economic activity they can take up. The seasonality of raw herbs harvesting activities allows these women to balance them with their other agricultural occupations.

A more limited number of women explain their motivation in taking part in GMCL activities with a demand to have access to an independent income as a means of resisting gender and ethnic subordination inside the village society. This minority of women were quite willing to challenge many of the gender norms in the interests of a higher income and to improve their social position. Thus changing the attitudinal barriers, which still persist among rural women, may take a long time. The case study reminds us that empowerment is a time consuming process. Considering the fact that *Sanghas* have been functioning only for a short time and the area is backward in all aspects, we feel that the 'take off stage' has been successful. A gradual shift in women's perception about the roles of their daughters is a clear indication of their changing attitude. However, the groups have a long way to go before becoming strong enough to change the power equations in the family and the society.

Conclusion

This case study emphasizes how empowerment cannot be constrained by a sectoral approach. Nor can it be related to just a set of activities or inputs. Empowerment is an all-encompassing term in which a whole range of economic and social activities including group organisation, agriculture and income generation initiatives, education, integrated health care and so on, would work synergistically towards the common goal of empowering the poor (Dessy and Ewoudou, 2006; Mayoux, 2006; Amin et al., 2003, Kabeer (2001). In this respect, the GMCL initiative has been effective, thanks to *its holistic approach*, which considered the different needs of women. It is clear from the GMCL experience that empowerment is not a final result of this development initiative or a state that can be attained within defined time-frames. Instead, empowerment is a dynamic and on-going process which can only be located on a continuum.

The capacity building initiatives carried out with the organizational and training support of NGOs such as CCD and FRLHT have given an opportunity to women to acquire several skills (literacy, accountancy, commercial, marketing, leadership etc..) and as a result, to begin to feel sufficiently self-confident to function as autonomous

individuals. But if acquisition of these skills became the essential step in empowering then at the individual level, the fact of carrying out an economic activity at collective basis provided the necessary motivation that united them at the collective level. The GMCL demonstrates that women may become successful entrepreneurs. Nevertheless, it cannot be assumed that increases in income will necessarily translate into increased control over that income or increased well-being or changes in other aspects of gender inequality. Under certain conditions, such as in GMCL case both processes do occur, but this is not automatic and can by no means be assumed. Without measures to address gender inequality, such as capacity building initiatives, enterprise development may merely increase women's workload and responsibilities without increasing their control over income.

Increasing women's participation must take into account potential costs. It must also take into account potential limitations to building on existing women's strategies and/or treating them as a long-term solution. There is likely to be a very delicate balance between building on women's own knowledge and experience and introducing (rather than imposing) new ideas and perspectives for change. Differences and potential conflicts of interest between women must also be taken into account. Arguably, a commitment to grassroots participation only makes sense within a broader political commitment to equity. Although this has been recognized in general terms in relation to class and caste, many development agencies are still unwilling to accept this in relation to gender. There are some ways in which these concerns could be integrated into enterprise programmes themselves. As GMCL effectively demonstrates, the types of support needed are likely to be highly context-specific and dependent on the particular needs and priorities of the women concerned.

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