ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Women Empowered Communities For Governance – A Social Study

Sunil Kumar Jangir

JJT University Chudela,Jhunjhunu (Rajasthan)

Abstract:

This article explores the various nuances of women's experiences they negotiate their victimized status to move towards empowerment. Feminist social work has to explore the existing agency of women and work towards their empowerment, by creating spaces to listen to their voices, developing capacity to articulate their issues and build strengths to deal with oppressive conditions which inhibit their potential for participation in governance. This article is an attempt to develop such a model of practice drawing from existing work in the field being done with women in North East India and Dalit women activities.

KEYWORDS:

Women, Governance, India,Political,Democratic,Victim.

INTRODUCTION

The term 'Governance' needs to be interrogated from the perspective of opportunity and space for ensuring gender equity within any given society. To use Hooks' (2007) proposition, it has considerable transformative potential to promote the voices of women, especially those seen to be in the 'margin', who are actually the 'centre'. The United Nations Development Programmer (UNDP) defines governance as "the exercise of political, economic and administrative authority to manage a country's affairs. It comprises the mechanisms, processes and institutions, through which citizens and groups articulate their differences

DEFINITION:

This definition suggests that a study of governance must include not only economic management but also political participation in both formal institutions of the state (including legislative, legal, and administrative institutions) and the informal groups, movement, and institutions of civil society.

Governance in India has been understood and linked with the current process of decentralization and devolution of powers to local institutions like the Panchayats (village level institutions). This is specifically true in the context of the recent Indian experiment of deepening local democracy through the 73rd and 74th Amendments (1993), which gives constitutional status to local self-governments and provides a more politically mandated platform for decentralized planning from below. These amendments have provided open spaces for women to move forward as political activists, thus changing the gender-relation equation at the local levels. Over the past fifteen years, Panchayat Raj Institutions in India have made remarkable progress in enhancing the representation of the marginalized in local governance structure. There are 1.05 million elected women representatives in the institutions of local governance in rural India (2008) which is truly significant phenomenon. Yet the Global Gender Report 2007 (Haussmann, Tyson and Zahidi, 2007) ranks India at 114 out of 128 countries, using a composite index of economic

participation, educational attainment, political empowerment and health and survival. This composite ranking places India below its South Asian neighbors—Sri Lanka and even Bangladesh (at 100), higher than Nepal and Pakistan only.

The answer can be found if the Indian socio-political scenario is examined with a sharper and gendered lens and we find that the mere presence of women as Sarpanches (leaders of Panchayats) does not necessarily ensure that they become good governance agents. There are several layers of inequality and discrimination which informs the active participation of women not just in deciding about the delivery of the state's welfare programmers but also ensuring a clean, transparent and accountable governance system which moves towards changing these inequalities. A report on the state of India's Panchayats (India, 2006) shows that women's participation in local government in the more progressive state of Kerala often reinforces their traditional roles as caregivers and homemakers, rather than helping them gain more influence over the decisions that affect women's lives. In Kerala, women occupy more than one-third of the local government seats. The research study done in Kerala identified a number of 'success stories'--- including women originally elected to reserved seats who went on to contest and win general seats. However, the study concluded that this did not translate into political influences. Most of the locally elected women interviewed in Kerala viewed themselves as social workers whose role is to distribute resources to meet people's basic needs. They rarely had the opportunity to occupy powerful positions or move on to political at higher levels. "The new spaces which held out the promise of political empowerment for women, seem to be reinforcing dominant gender norms" (Ibid). The leadership of the male-dominated political parties shows little interest in increasing the number of women in local government or expanding the scope of their participation. This research highlights the fact, that, if women do not engage with self and the internalized patriarchy within themselves, they will not be able to negotiate further than the local and will often reinforce the patriarchal roles.

This would mean expanding the concept of governance into a transformative and gendered perspective. Definitions of 'governance' range from a restricted view focusing on sound management of the economy, to a more expansive view that embraces political liberalization and problems of social inequality. According to the expansive definition, good governance implies democratic governance, meaning an agenda for participation, human rights, and social justice. According to the United Nations (2002), democratic governance "involves developing institutions and processes that are more responsive to the needs of ordinary citizens". More specifically, it seeks to promote greater participation of marginalized groups within political processes, through addressing inequalities associated with gender, class, race, ethnicity, caste, disability and sexuality, among other variables, and greater accountability of governments towards those who have traditionally been excluded from political action, Preece (2002) explains that from a gender perspective, the issue of who governs citizens and what mechanism of governance are in place, directly impacts women in terms of representation, voice and methodology, and also the kind of space women are given in which to act as individual or collective citizens. Within this kind of an explanation, the given reality is very different as mechanisms of 'governance' are also defined largely by the dominant rather than the marginalized and hence, women from marginalized communities often find it difficult to exercise their 'citizenship' rights as the very mechanisms meant for increasing their participation into governance denies them the spaces them spaces to articulate their views.

If, that is so, then, how do we view women in governance? Can we then assert that different women from these different locations should be seen as actor and active participants? Also, that, governance is the process which will empower them and ensure structural transformation of gender relations within and outside these diversities? In that case what should be the empowering strategies that human rights defenders need to undertake?

In India, women are a diverse category and are positioned according to their caste, class, tribe, minority and sexual orientations. Women in the marginalized communities, especially the Dalits and Advises, experience a great deal of violence within homes and outside; and are curtailed from exercising their agency beyond boundaries set up by their situation within the axis of these social stratifies. They are deliberately constructed as 'victims' of violence, caste discrimination and poverty, which denies them the opportunities to exercise their agency. Their experience of victimhood is varied in nature dependent on their location within the society based on class, caste, ethnicity, region, religion and tribe. Yet, these women have always been inherently suspicious about why they are unable to move beyond a point of negotiation and are oppressed when they try to exercise their agency. Bama (2005) in her writings has captured this process of recognition of oppression among Dalit women. Such women recognize their oppression and the sources of oppression. They continue to negotiate and challenge those who oppress, be it upper caste men and women or men within their own communities. Both Bama (2005) and Baby Kemble (2009) in their autobiographical account share powerfully what Dalit women have been and continue to be empowered within and living with a knowledge of self and dignity.

There is a need for a deeper interrogation of not just this 'agency' which is apparent in these accounts, but also the opposing and consistent portrayal of 'victimized' women especially, from these marginalized communities. What needs to be recognized is the presence of patriarchy as a system deeply embedded within all social, cultural and economic institutions which ensures and deepens gender inequality and 'others', women within all societies and how it interacts with different constructed societal categories to 'victimize' women. While saying this, it also important to reiterate that women when recognized as representatives of specific communities more so from Dalit, tribe, ethnic or religious background often find themselves caught within these intersections wherein their marginalization is an outcome of many of the social constructions of these identities. Together with the construction of identities is the social construction of gender which leads to the premise of 'victimhood'. 'Victimhood' which is daily internalized by women through regulated practice of socio-cultural norms, is deeply patriarchal in nature.

We need to reiterate that patriarchy is the system which constructs gender and gendered role. It is an all pervasive phenomenon which guides cultural norms, social behavior and extends to the way work is allocated within and outside homes. Societal norms shape the way women are socialized throughout childhood and within this it is important to recognize that these norms differ from caste, region to region, tribe to tribe, ethnicity to ethnicity and religion to religion. Each of these social stratifies intersect in women's life in socio-cultural specific ways to position and embed patriarchy in its unique formula. Therefore, any discussion on gender relations and power will have to examine these unique features to understand the essential aspects of women's victimhood and processes of empowerment.

There is a growing body of knowledge that women have played a variety of active roles throughout history and embarked on various cultural activities, which makes one wonder about the motives for depiction of women as incapable, helpless, demeaned and victimized. The issue is of vital concern for our belief about us and our world is constitutive of social practices and action (Elashtain, 1981).

WOMEN CULTURAL AND COMMUNITY

According to Eagleton (2002) the word cultural means both what is around us and inside us and the disruptive drives within can easily be equated with anarchic forces without. He further explains that cultural according to him is a kind of ethical pedagogy which will fit us for political citizenship by liberating the ideal or collective self buried within each of us, for political citizenship by liberating the ideal or collective self buried within each of us, a self which finds supreme representation in the universal realm of the state. 'Culture' can provide people with a collective identity shaped through norms, rituals, behavior and other specific elements, while at the same time 'culture' arranges human life into hierarchies and behavior codes, 'social' in nature, which in the case of many societies is deeply patriarchal. Culture also plays an important role in empowering women, if seen, perceived and practiced positively. If deconstructed, subversive expression of culture through music, dance, poetry and theatre have proven to be powerful ways in which women have engaged to introspect, critique, question and come together in solidarity to overcome deep sense of victimhood towards agency and negotiation. These have acted as tools of catharsis, self reflection and liberation. The dynamic nature of diversities among women from Dalit and Aadivasi communities, acts as a strong catalyst to foster sisterhood and build strength for breaking down of patriarchal boundaries in these diverse forms. Therefore, it will need a continuous effort on part of the women to understand the facets and nuances of men's systematic control over women's sexuality—what we might call the "sexual contract"—which crosses all institutional arenas such as the family, community, market and the state.

All the same time, while examining the collective as a notion of 'community', it is imperative that one approaches the concept with caution and rather look at it with notions of 'fluidity' and 'empowerment'. As Human Rights Defenders, it is also critical not to move with the premise of the imagined community (Bauman 1991) which will inevitably lead to a process where differences among the women will either get suppressed or will get excluded from the majority action. So, if within a location there are Dalit women of different caste (for example, valmiki and chamar) and even tribal women, it is important to recognize that each has their own reality which needs to be explored, before any action is taken, therefore one has to understand that diversities exist within the smallest of the society microcosm and any discussion or action for human rights needs to keep this fact as a centre point.

CREATING NEW COMMUNITIES AND EXERCISING AGENCIES: A WAY FORWARD

Keeping these experiences in mind, the way forward would be to create and build new communities of women from marginalized groups. This work would require activists to address the specificities' of the diverse sets of women and their socio political and cultural context. Some of the way as

suggested by nominally (2000) are

Accept the inevitability of dealing with conflit.explore instead positive forms of conflict tension and those that are antagonistic, take care not to generate conflicts that increase vulnerabilities' of marginalized groups.
Ensure that outside facilitatators are self critical and reflexive, rather than patronizing and manipulative
Identify what the term women means in all its diverse local forms by women themselves and as interpreted by researchers and professionals.

CONCLUSION

This paper is an attempt to weave   in the concept of intersectionality and its relevance when working with women from diverse communities with their differential lavational and experiences of victimhood in the case of both Dalits adivasis,women draw strength and capacity from their community and collective momentum is possible through the mentioned processes. There has to a continuous praxes of knowledge and practices through a process of feminist community building. a key element for social workers is to maintain ongoing reflection and interrogation of self as activists and examine victimhood as it has emerged and change the processes to become key actives players in government and gain control over their lives and those of others within communities.
This paper is an attempt to draw Perspectives and weave them in to a practice framework for social work. Much of the ideas their origin to the women activities from the conflict zones of north eastern India the Dalit communities of India

REFERENCES

Bauman Z. (1993) :Modern and ambivalence,oxford,polity press
Batilvala S.(2007):Taking Power out of Empowerment, Open Democracy.
Bama (2005) Sangati:Events,New Delhi oxford university press
Charlier,S and Cauberge,L (2007):The Women Empowerment Approach: A Methodological Guide.
Dominelli,L (2007)Women and Community Action, New Delhi Rawat Publications
Eagleton (2000) the idea of culture, Maladen: Blackwell Publishers.
Elshtain,J.B (1981):Public man, Private Women in Social and Political Thought, Princeton university press
Kamble,B(2007) :The Prison We Broke, New Delhi: Orient Black Swan
Padwell, C and Perrons, D.(2007) Politics of Governance, one World Action. Report of seminars on politics of covernance,united kingdom: London