



Gender Discrimination in community Participation for Slum Development Programmes: A Case Study of Slum Women in Silchar Town

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Abstract

In any developmental and welfare activity, participation of people from all sections of society is very essential. People's participation irrespective of caste, class, religion and gender is currently recognized as a pivotal element of welfare programmes. But it is a dream for a bulk section of our society, particularly those who are having lower position in social strata, to participate in welfare programmes. Gender discrimination is a common practice in all most all society and discrimination is also observed in women's participation for developmental programmes. This practice also prevails among slums residing in towns and cities of our nation. This paper highlights participation of slum women in slum development programmes in Silchar town of North-East India.

Keywords: Slum women, development programmes, peoples participation, gender discrimination, equality.

Introduction

Women's participation can play a significant role in the development process and it increases community awareness creating a sense of responsibility in society. Participation from below is a concept developed by social thinkers and policy makers to ensure equality through improvement of level of participation of people belonging to lower strata of our society for development programmes. In a patriarchal social system women are always treated as inferior to men and their contribution to family and society is hardly recognised and honoured. They are excluded from decision making activity inside the family and the society they live in. Slum dwelling people also follow the tradition of their society from where they have migrated to towns and cities. Tradition of gender discrimination also persists in slum areas. But the reality is that women constitute a significant proportion of population in the slum pockets and therefore their participation in development programmes is also important. The success of development programmes depend on the greater participation of women in the development programmes to a large extent. Genuine and unflinching involvement of the women right from the initial stage of the programmes ensures the success of different programmes. Slum women in slum pockets of Silchar town would have been involved in the development programmes right from the beginning to make slum improvement programmes successful. Because of illiteracy, ignorance, poor outlook and male domination in family and society slum women of Silchar town are not able to mobilise themselves towards involvement in slum development programmes.

Concept and Theory: The process of urbanisation have brought changes in all most all countries. Due to the process of urbanisation there have been change in every aspect of people's

life but such changes have both good and bad impact on people's life¹. The phenomenon of slum is regarded as a major problem of Urbanization². There is hardly any city in the world without any slums³. Mexico city, Bueons Aries, Medellin, Calli all have slums and shanty towns⁴. The problems of slums in India are immense⁵.

Slums are an area where the economically, socially and educationally weak people live. The characteristics and size of slums differ in different countries, but most of them are characterised by poor housing, unhealthy drinking water, poor drainage system, lack of all weather roads, improper electrification and other necessities of life⁶. Slums may be described as an area which is the result of unsystematic planning, it is overcrowded with human population. People in the area suffer from improper infrastructure, lack of medical facilities and many more. People in the area are also deprived of welfare services and different organizations which work for the betterment of the people so that the people can get good employment opportunities which help them to improve their standard of living, get good education facilities, improve the quality of food they take as people and children in the area suffer due to lack of healthy food. Slum area is also regarded as the breeding ground for several crimes and anti social activities⁷. According to R.D. McKenzie slum is in area where families and individuals are compeled to live in a close relationship with those folks whom they ignore and prefer to keep a distance. It is a place where people live without any values or principles, there is also lack of civility and politeness among the populace of the area, apart from those which are made obligatory by the outside authority. As the people are living in such a social setting they don't have any separate grade and the people's wish for identification or respects are unfulfilled⁸.

Charles Stokes classifies slums into slums of hope and slums of despair. Slums of hope are transient segments irrespective of the duration for which individuals are compelled to stay therein. That is, a person or a family may stay there for a brief while or for a fairly long period, and yet they have a pronounced feeling that they are on the way out, sooner or later. They are not resigned to be willing and full participants in the socio-economic milieu of the slum for they believe that they have this role to play in the larger urban complex. On the other hand, slums of despair present a picture of finality and resignation, the significant aspect is that slum dwellers themselves feel that way and seem to be captives of the hold secured within the slum⁹. The theoretical formulation of John Seeley is equally incisive. He calls for appreciation of the fact that the slum is a multi-dimensional phenomenon. It is not possible to deal with or understand it, in exclusive, piecemeal perspectives. It is also a vain hope if one expects to resolve the slum dilemma by any one policy alternative, be it upward rise in urban real income, massive changes in the level of living or urban development plans in action. The slum is also not merely a refuge, nor a transient inevitability. Another aspect is that the slum provides goods and services to non-slum population; however perverted the demands might be, as reflected in the access to call girls, vice dens, gambling, crime and violence. Seeley affirms that slum fulfils a permanent and continuing function in the urban segment. That itself makes it difficult to extirpate the slum. Not a very soothing formulation, especially because it ignores the basic fact of the helplessness heaped on the desolate poor. Seeley is not prepared to think in terms of complete eradication of slums for he would not take a second look at the capitalist economic compulsions in the west that sustain a theoretical façade of democratic structures and processes. Seeley gives another characterization to slum dwellers. There are some compelled by the difference between necessity and opportunity whereas there are others influenced by the difference between permanence and change. Hence, he gives four basic types of slum dwellers; the permanent necessitarians, the temporary necessitarians, the permanent opportunists, and the temporary opportunists. Permanent necessitarians, include the condemned and chronic unemployed, the social rejects and the forlorn poor; temporary necessitarians include the poor who are victims of adverse circumstances, the so-called respectable poor; permanent opportunists include the prostitutes, outlaws, fugitives and criminals; and, temporary opportunists include the beginners who have just entered the slum complex. Oscar Lewis studies the nature of the slum community and he finds that despite some trace of existence of a sense of community, the slum dwellers have a minimum of organization beyond the nuclear and extended family. Primarily, slums show a marginal and anomalous pattern of organization in the midst of an otherwise organized society. Regarding their nature of the family Lewis explains that strong feeling of fatalism, helplessness, dependence and inferiority is pervasive among individuals which emanates from and in turn adversely affects the nature of the family, which shows instability, authoritarian tendencies, lack of privacy and absence of reciprocal spirit. The

culture of poverty shows that the poor are marginal people in the heart of urban complex. They are locally and provincially oriented and only partially integrated into national institutions. They are subjected to low level of literacy and education; get little welfare relief; face unemployment or underemployment; if at all, are paid low wages; have to accept child labour; do not belong to labour unions or political parties; they are unskilled; have no food reserves; borrow if and when they can; resort to violence in and outside the family; live in crowded quarters; get addicted to alcohol and vice; hate and suspect law enforcing agencies; and, above all, there is cynicism in culture of poverty, which makes it a potential for being used in political movements aimed against the existing social order¹⁰.

Methodology

The study is descriptive and qualitative in nature. The slum pockets of Silchar town constitute the universe of the study and slum women constitute the unit of study. Total 638 number of slum women in Silchar town has been randomly selected from three main slum pockets namely Madhura Ghat, Itkhola Ghat and Kalibari Chor. The study is based on both primary and secondary sources of data. Primary data is based on observation, interview schedule and case study method. Secondary data is gathered from books journals and reports of different organisations

Slums of Silchar Town: There are 14 Slum pockets in Silchar town according to Town and Country Planning Office. These slum pockets are Madhura Ghat or Gandhi Ghat Colony, Radharaman Colony, Adharnath Colony, Mokam Road or Manipuri Basti Road, Itkhola Ghat Colony, Idgah Ghat Colony or Swamiji Road, Kalibari Char, Mahut Para Lane 1 and 2, Sib Colony, Joydurga Colony – Biswanath Colony, Sweeper's Colony, Fishermans' Colony, Gossaipara, and New Colony. All these Slum pockets are having population with more or less same religious groups i.e., Hindu. Kalibari Chor is the oldest and largest slum area in Silchar Town and has the highest population among all the slums pockets. Its total population is 11900. Itkhola Ghat has a medium size population (2600) and Madhura Ghat has the small population (1430). Besides, these three slum areas, there are also other approved slum pockets of Silchar Municipal Board. Both Town and Country Planning office and Silchar Municipal Board have approved the three slum pockets.

Slums of Silchar town are characterized by poor socio-economic condition. Majority of the houses in slum pockets are kutcha with tin sheet, polythene or bamboo roofing. There is existence of both joint and nuclear families in the slum areas of Silchar town, but nuclear families are more in number. Social composition of different slum pockets shows that people of all caste viz, General caste, Schedule Caste, Schedule Tribe, Other Backward Caste (OBC) are residing in the slum pockets. Majority of the people are Hindu by religion and belong to Bengali community. Education of the people in slum area is

very low. Majority of slums are earning their livelihood from day labour, domestic work and other low income occupations. Very few slum dwellers are engaged in government and private jobs. The slum women of Silchar town are mostly illiterate. Their family income is also very poor. Most of them are engaged in domestic work in towns. A significant proportion of them are unemployed and depended to the family for their livelihood. Socio-economic profile of slum women in Silchar town is also very poor. In the family very few slum women take part in decision making process. The female child is often given less importance than male child in the family.

Results and Discussion

Slum pockets of Silchar town are having common problems like problem of drinking water, sanitation, water logging, improper roads, poor housing and others problems. Development programmes are initiated by government to overcome these basic problems of slum area. Though quality and quantity of works are not satisfactory but slum people are of the view that government has at least started to solve their problems. The thrust area of concern of the respective slum pockets is different from one another. The basic problem of the three pockets is different. The first basic problem of Madhura Ghat is that of poor housing as 82.76% of respondents have reported it but the first basic problem in Itkhola Ghat and Kalibari Chor is of drinking water and improper roads as pointed out by 92.31% and 98.95% respondents respectively. The second basic problem in Madhura Ghat as identified by the respondents is that of water logging and flood as the weightage given to both these problems are equal i.e. 81.03% respondents reported it. Improper road was the second basic problem of Itkhola Ghat as 79.81% respondents pointed out that but improper road was the first basic problem of Kalibari Chor. The second basic problem of Kalibari Chor was drinking water (98.74%) however it is interesting to note that drinking water was the first basic problem of Itkhola Ghat. Infact, almost all the conceivable slum problems were pointed out by the respondents.

In Itkhola Ghat out of 104 respondents 47.12% of them have heard about Public Health Engineering (PHED), 20.19% of them have heard about Swarna Jayanti shehari Rozgar Yojana (SJSRY) and 8.65% know about District Development Plan(DDP). The awareness level of women about various programmes is poor. When asked the reason of unawareness they gave various reasons, some of them say that they stay at home that is why they are unaware, others say that they are busy with their own work, some respondents also replied that this is concern of male members of the family.

When the women were asked whether government officials /ward commissioner /NGOs take up any plan to arouse their interest in the slum development activities, 40.13% respondents gave positive reply while 55.17% of them replied in negative and 4.70% are totally ignorant. Thus the official agencies have

to take more initiatives to arouse people's interest in slum developmental activities.

The respondents who gave positive answers are further asked to denote the measures adopted by Government officials, Ward Commissioner and NGOs in arousing people's interest in slum development programmes. Out of 256 respondents who replied in positive, 25% of them expressed that public meeting was convened to obtain opinion of the people while 75% respondents answered that informal discussion was made by the authority. It was also expressed by the respondents that it is generally the male members of the family who participate in public meeting or informal discussion. However it is important to note that all such initiatives were taken in case of government programmes but all such did not happened in the programmes introduced by the NGOs. No NGO has taken any step to arouse people's interest, though empowerment of women is the most important objective of every NGO of the locality.

Majority of the respondents i.e. 78.53% are aware about how different schemes under various improvement programmes are launched by the government and how are these schemes formulated in the slum pocket. When these respondents are further asked to specify how schemes are formulated, large number of women (78.53%) have said that it is the ward commissioner who take key role in the formulation of development schemes for the betterment of the people of the area. Some said that ward commissioner and leader of the slum both decide in the formulation of the schemes. While others added that the ward commissioner, leader of the slum and male members of slum area decides.

Out of 638 women only 17.24% said that they participated in scheme formulation and 82.76% did not participate. Highest number of women participation in the scheme formulation is found in Madhura Ghat. Around 27.59% of the respondents of Madhura Ghat reported that they participated in formulation of schemes. Around 16.35% of respondents of Itkhola Ghat and 16.18% respondents of Kalibari Chor reported their participation in scheme formulation. The respondents who gave negative reply are also asked to spell out the reasons for not participating in the formulation process. The respondents sighted various reasons like male members do not allow them to take part in it. Some women also feel that they are ignored, while some added that they were pre-occupied with their own activities.

The participation of women in the implementation of programmes is very poor. In Madhura Ghat and Kalibari Chor none of the women participated in any of the scheme implementation process. Only 1.92% women out of 104 in Itkhola Ghat took an active part in implementation by monitoring the improvement of Itkhola Ghat road and 98.08% of them did not take part in any implementation programme. The reasons that are put forwarded by them for not taking part in implementation of programmes are male domination within

and outside family, pre-occupation of women with household activities, domination of slum leaders. They also feel that their voice is ignored by the society.

Ward Commissioner plays a vital role in the implementation of developmental programmes. Around 91.37% of respondents in Madhura Ghat, 92.31% of respondents in Itkola Ghat and 98.74% of respondents in kalibari chor have reported the fact. Next to ward commissioner are the leaders of the slum area, male members of the slum households who decide everything regarding formulation and implementation of slum development programmes.

The various government development programmes are implemented by the Ward commissioner, Leader of the slum, males of the slum households and other key persons. As regarding the programmes of the NGOs, all the programmes are implemented by the NGOs themselves. The female have a very little role in the implementation of various developmental programmes. The slum women face constraint to participate in the formulation and implementation of slum development programmes. They faced constraints because of male member's domination within family and society. Local political leaders also dominate them. Their voice is ignored in the formulation and implementation process. The slum women are also pre-occupied with their own activities. They said that the ward commissioner act as the key person in the formulation and implementation process. The slum development programmes have impact on women, they are benefitted by the programmes that are introduced for them by the government and NGOs. The respondents also feel that the people of the area are also being benefitted by the improvement initiatives. But they are dissatisfied with the formulation and implementation process because they have a little role in this regard.

Conclusion

Slum women in Silchar town are not able to participate in the slum development programmes due to several reasons. Their illiteracy, poverty and ignorance is being capitalised by a

section of local leaders and politicians. The male members of slum pockets are always indifferent about mobilisation of slum women. Male members do not want their females to be a part of decision making process. Role of ward commissioner is important for involvement of women in development programmes but ward commissioners of slum areas of Silchar town are not taking any initiatives to engage women in development programmes. NGOs are also not taking any active part for women's participation in slum development programmes. Awareness programmes are not regularly organised by NGOs to educate and make the slum women aware about their right to participate in slum development programmes.

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