

Review

Empowering Women in the Silk Sector: Uniting Agency and Structural Opportunities

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This article examines empowerment theory and concept advocated by Antony Giddens in case of women involved in silkworm rearing in Rural India. The focus of the article is how sericulture provides an opportunity for women's economic participation and to embraces it as their livelihood. It also explores how their participation changes their image from domestic unpaid worker to main contributor of household. It also highlights how sericulture participation increases their networking amongst themselves and perhaps to quote as feminization of sericulture work.

Keywords: Women, Agency, Opportunity structure, Economic Empowerment, Silkworm rearing, Feminization, Silk Industry.

INTRODUCTION

Women's agency is seen as a tool that bestows on them the capacity for taking independent action for overcoming barriers for emancipation. However, if women's agency is to be created a number of supporting factors such as access to education, health care, technology, control over property and assets, participation in household and community decision making, measures to halt domestic and other forms of violence on women, tackling discrimination against girls, building self-esteem, mobility, social visibility and dignity must be present. The above mentioned indicators hold the key to transforming gender relations.

The theoretical framework for placing women's situation relies heavily on discussions of power in the

literature on social theory. Social thinkers such as Giddens (1984) emphasize the relationship between agency and structure. Empowerment is defined as an individual's or group's capacity to make choices relating to desired actions and outcomes. This capacity to make an effective choice is primarily influenced by two sets of factors: Agency and Opportunity Structure (Kabeer, 1999).

Agency

Agency is seen as an actor's ability to make meaningful choices, i.e., enable the actor to choose the course of her/his life. An individual's agency can be largely predicted by their assets or endowments. Assets are stocks of resources that equip actors to use economic, social and political opportunities (Moser, 1998). Assets can be psychological, informational, organizational, material, social, financial or human (Swift, 1989).

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Opportunity Structure

Opportunity structure on the other hand symbolizes the formal and informal contexts within which human beings operate. These factors create situations in which individuals either access opportunities for empowerment or experience constraints. Opportunity is created by factors such as laws, regulatory frameworks, norms and customs governing people's behavior. These external factors determine the type and extent of access to sources that are required to achieve desired outcomes.

In the majority of developing countries self-employment is the most important means of survival for women (Mitter, 2004). Women have remained invisible as farmers in spite of their contribution to farming. Economists do not record women's agricultural labour as 'work' or 'production' as it falls outside the so called 'production boundary' (Waring, 1998). Sericulture is not an exception to this notion. In spite of women's important contribution to silk industry, people fail to recognise it as a production activity. Women's work has been largely overlooked and under reported in sericulture because it is usually unpaid. Therefore, they are not included in the 'economically active' category. According to the Annual Report of Central Silk Board (CSB, 2008) about 60 percent of the women work force contributes substantially to the country's sericulture output. However, due to different socio-cultural values among various caste groups, the participation of rural women in development programmes is as negligible as their share in the benefits of development.

All women in sericulture generally perceive, articulate and negotiate their participation in sericulture activities from their agency and the prevailing opportunity structure. Consequently, sericulture women's empowerment needs to be understood in terms of agency and opportunity structure. There is a direct correlation between the levels of gender empowerment in a society (measured on the basis of women's literacy and education rates, access to health care, capital, means of production and degree of women's participation in public and professional life) and that country's level of economic, social and political development (UNDP, 2006).

Women's participation in economic activities outside their domestic sphere depends on their capacity to effectively counter the various modes of oppression that operate in that society. In other words, the empowerment levels of women are determined by the combined operation of agency and opportunity structure (Giddens, 1984). The present study uses this model of empowerment.

This paper is mainly dedicated to a discussion of theoretical constructs relating to women's agency and opportunity structure. Studies that have used this conceptual framework have been used as the background for discussion of the nature of women's

economic participation. In order to supplement the theoretical framework case studies drawn from the empirical data collected for this study have been used.

Since economic independence and the capacity to generate resources are seen as the key to empowerment, in this article an effort has been made to understand the nature of women's economic participation by examining both opportunities and constraints.

With this background the study was undertaken with the specific objective to analyse the role of 'agency' and 'opportunity' as the two primary bases of sericulture women's economic empowerment

The study was conducted in selected four villages of Mandya district, Karnataka State. Multistage random sampling technique was adopted for the selection of villages, taluks as well as sample farmers. A total of twenty-five sericulture women farmers from each village were selected randomly. The total number of women sericulture farmers thus amounts to 100. Besides, focused group discussions and preparation of case studies, informal interactions were also held at all stages of data collection to supplement the data elicited through the interview schedule.

Economic Participation and Women's Agency

Participation of women in sericulture activities is either internally stimulated or externally induced. The internally induced group includes self-motivated women, who participate in sericulture activities as paid labour. Those who are externally induced belong to the category of family workers who participate in sericulture activities, because their families are in the sericulture sector.

The level of a woman's economic participation and ability to engage in gainful economic activity renders her independent and visible. Participation in the labour market enhances her economic value as well as social status (Bardhan, 1974). A visible economic contribution and lower economic dependency would place women in a better bargaining position and confer on them the benefit of a favorable inter and intra house hold resource allocation (Dreze and Sen, 1995).

Economic participation of women both as paid and unpaid labour is more in the case of sericulture activities. Because of the high level of their participation, they are viewed as less liable (Bardhan, 1974). The patience and persistence needed for repetitive work or the ability and inclination to work in a team are the qualities that sericulture often associates with women. In women headed households without adult male members women perform tasks that are essentially considered masculine. These include ploughing, harrowing, irrigating, shoot harvesting, application of manure, application chemicals and so on. This perception, real or the product of gender stereotyping partly explains the feminization of the work force in the silk industry.

Women who have the internal stimulus to take up sericulture mainly do so because of an economic need. Non-availability of required resources to take up sericulture independently is the main cause for women to participate in sericulture activity either as 'hired' or 'family labour'.

Changes in rural social institutions like shrinking of joint families, emergence of more and more nuclear families with fragmented land holdings act as the main constraint for women to engage in cultivation of commercial crops. The case of Yashodamma illustrates this point.

Yashodamma is a widow in her early sixties. She has four sons and two daughters. Nearly two decades ago when her husband was alive the entire family was engaged in sericulture. The family land was divided after her sons got married. She now lives with her youngest son, who has only two acres of land. After realising the fact that 1 ha of land is not a sufficient enough resource to take up cultivation of any commercial crop, Yashodamma along with her son and daughter-in-law decided to take up sericulture again (after 20 years). Since the last four years Yashodamma is engaged in sericulture activity.

There are also instances of women, who were earlier growing sugarcane having gradually moved into sericulture. Sugarcane is an annual crop and farmers can reap the harvest only once a year, unlike sericulture (4-5 crops is the normal pattern). They had to sell the sugarcane yield to the sugar factory located in the vicinity and wait for payment for 6-8 months. Moreover, the rate that farmers received for a tonne was very low. They found sugarcane cultivation an economically non-viable activity and turned to sericulture. Women have shown that they can adapt to fluctuations in the agricultural sector by shifting their focus from one crop to the other, as in the case of Amritha.

Amrutha is aged about 37 years. She dropped out of school in her 11th grade. She was a sugarcane cultivator earlier, but since the past three years she is engaged in silkworm rearing. Amritha owns 0.3 ha of land in her name, which she inherited from her father. Her father did not have any male children, and hence bequeathed the land to Amritha. Low sugarcane price and delayed payments put the family in difficulties. The regular flow of income that sericulture ensured encouraged the family to move over to sericulture.

Sericulture is such a type of livelihood, in which a farmer can take up rearing even without owning land, rearing house or rearing equipment. All the tools required by a sericulture farmer are available on hire. This flexibility is the greatest asset of sericulture. Majority of the women in our research area had taken up sericulture activities on rented land or by renting a rearing house. Engaging in sericulture activity on leased land or rearing house, with hired equipment is definitely a symbol of increased economic participation and empowerment of women. Where women have the opportunity for

economic participation even without owning land or other assets, the presence of a strong agency can motivate them to engage in gainful economic activity as it happened in the case of Chennamma.

Chennamma, a forty five year old woman from Haleboodanoor village was a small time tailor and also reared sheep for her livelihood. She took to sericulture during her free time. As she gained experience in sericulture she decided to go for it full time. However, Chennamma had to wait for a few years before she could locate a piece of land that would be available on lease close to her place of dwelling. When she was finally able to secure the land, along with a pump set for an amount of Rs. 6,900 per annum, she took to sericulture as a full time activity. She uses her own dwelling space for silkworm rearing. During her spare time Chennamma also works as hired labour.

In spite of wage differences, women prefer to work for sericulture activities because of an uninterrupted chance to work, negotiable working hours, the opportunity to work with a familiar social group and a comfortable work ambience. Sericulture has emerged as an economic activity that has helped women to overcome the image of women as unpaid domestic workers and transform themselves as major contributors to their household's wellbeing. In that sense sericulture can act as an agency facilitating empowerment.

Nandini is a seventeen year old studying in 11th grade. Nandini's mother died two years ago and the responsibility of her four-member family (an ailing grand mother, a school going younger sister and her father) besides herself fell on her shoulders. She wakes up at 4 am in the morning, cooks, cleans and tenders the silkworm. After she returns from school, her routine continues, sometime into wee hours. Nandini has, however accepted the 'multitasker' role very positively. She perceives herself in the role of her mother.

The sericulture sector sees women's participation both as paid and unpaid labour. The patience and persistence needed for repetitive work or the ability and inclination to work in a team that women have are qualities that sericulture associates with women. Women's multi-tasking abilities place them in a prime position in sericulture. This explains the feminisation of sericulture work force. Another reason for sericulture having a strong potential for empowering women is the opportunity that it provides for networking amongst women.

Women's agency, when supported by opportunity structure can actually help women to take up challenges that may often be unforeseen. The fact that women have the capacity to be proactive even under stressful conditions is demonstrated by the case of Mamatha given below.

Mamatha is a widow with two children, aged 7 and 10 years. Her husband died due to excessive consumption of alcohol. Since then she has taken the baton. She worked initially as sericulture labour and after acquiring

adequate knowledge of sericulture related activities, she raised mulberry in her husband's land. Under Indira Awas Yojana, she got the funds to build a dwelling house, but later on she converted it into a rearing house and started silkworm rearing on her own. After that she never looked back. Right from buying *chawki* worms, garden work, transportation of mulberry shoots, feeding worms and marketing she is doing it all alone. Mamatha faced severe physical and mental abuse from her husband, and had never ventured out of her house during his life time. Today she is the president of two Mahila Mandals and a progressive sericulture entrepreneur.

Patriarchy and gender bias in resource allocation have for long barred women from inheriting property, particularly land. Most families whom we met for this study said 'we have paid dowry to get our daughters married, how can we give them a share in property? They further continued 'we sold a part of our property to get our daughters married, how can you expect us to give one more part. If government can stop dowry, we can avoid selling land and distribute it to our daughters'. They also said that small land holdings, which they possessed, did not lend themselves for further split, and hence they were not inclined to give their daughters also a share.

In the absence of land title and ownership of cattle, women do not have access to credit. In the words of Agarwal (1994) 'land defines social status and political power in the village and it structures relationship both within and outside the household. Yet, for most women, effective rights in land remain elusive, even as their marital and kin support, it erodes and female-headed households multiply. In legal terms, women have struggled for and won fairly extensive rights to inherit and control land in much of South Asia, but in practice most stands disinherited. Few own land, even fewer can exercise effective control over it'. Papanek (1990) noted that gender based inequality in resource allocation is a key factor that perpetuates other forms of social and economic inequalities against women.

Very few women, i.e., those without a male partner or women without male children inherited property in their name. Ownership of land, access to irrigation facilities and awareness of technological innovations are factors that facilitate social change, but these facilities are mostly available to men. (Heggede, 1992; Gopalan, 1993; Rani, Usha, Vyas 1993; Hiraway, 1996; Singh, 1996; Visaria, 1999; Arya and Samra, 2001). Cultural norms and beliefs deprive women of land, credit facilities, as well as education, health and hygiene (Dankleman and Davidson, 1988). Yet, few women inherit property either by default or because their families have an ulterior motive, as it happened in the case of Kamala.

Kamala had inherited two acres of land from her father. In spite of this, her husband who also purchased half an acre of land two years ago also registered the same in her name. When asked the reason behind registering the property in her name, she replied 'government benefits

including bank loan are easily available to women, if the property is in her name. In order to avail the benefits, my husband registered the property in my name. There is nothing special about it'.

It is not her husband's respect for the concept of giving property rights for women that was responsible for his action, but the fact that it is easier to get monetary benefits when women seek them because of their good track record of repayment.

Farmers in the study area particularly, Haleboodanoor and Mallayana Doddi (Maddur taluk) have suffered the impact of the conversion of the Mysore-Bangalore road into a four lane highway. This conversion work engulfed large tracts of land and many dwelling areas. Many farmers with properties on the roadside sold the same to big businessmen. Today they are left with neither cash nor other assets. Many among them have taken up sericulture on leased lands with their women taking the initiative.

To ensure gender equity in the sericulture sector both state and central governments have enacted many schemes with a focus on women. This includes giving subsidies, funds and grants to women who own land. However, not all families are ready to give women their rightful share in landed property.

By providing small loans to millions of women, Bangladesh women's microfinance programmes served as models to the rest of the world (Mizan, 1994). Cross-sectional studies suggested that women have high levels of loan repayments and they reported improved standards of living, control over decision-making household income and increased reproductive choices and greater control over their families (Hashemi, Schuler and Riley, 1996; Khandker, 1998; Steele, Amin and Naved, 1998; Kabeer, 2001). Most women wanted larger loans to expand their businesses (Siddiqui, 2000). The Bangladesh experience has shown that where women are in control, family prosperity is enhanced.

Women could earlier access credit only from money lenders but now with the emergence of Self Help Groups, women have free and fair access to credit. Easy, informal, convenient and manageable credit delivery mechanism of SHGs has helped rural women to engage in entrepreneurial activities. Increased access to credit has also enhanced confidence and many women sericulturists have been able to repay loans taken from private money lenders. It may, however be mentioned that women's access to credit particularly from microfinance group would ensue not from the developmentalist concerns of the state, but from the feminist critique of capitalism, which highlights the importance of transforming economic structures in challenging patriarchy (Mayoux, 1998).

Women's economic participation also depends on their access to market. In the case of sericulture, accessibility to cocoon market is an important element in enhancing their participation. Often these markets are easily

approachable for women because of physical proximity, as the case of Sunandamma illustrates.

Sunandamma is a 35 year old is a married woman with two daughters. The elder daughter is married and the younger one goes to school. Her husband who suffered from chronic bronchitis and is virtually immobile. Sunandamma sold part of the family land to get her elder daughter married and she is left with only half an acre of land. Not discouraged by an incapable husband and a small piece of land, she started sericulture on her own land to eek out a living for her family. Initially she would take the help of male members in her neighbourhood to go to the nearby market, but over a period of time she has learnt to manage her small enterprise on her own. She feels that cocoon markets are women friendly.

Women's public access to paid work as an income-generating activity via their ties with the labor market has broadened some of their social entitlements. It has enabled them to gain economic independence and limited personal autonomy to have greater control over household budget and decision-making to increase their negotiating power with regard to childcare, domestic chores and to raise their self-esteem (Chow, 2002).

Participation in sericulture activities gives sericulture women a voice that entitles them to save their earnings and also gives them the freedom to decide how they want to spend their money. Whether a woman is a wage earner or not she mostly spends the resource at hand on the family. However, decision making power is higher among paid participants because of their employment (Bhatt, 1998). Another reason for this is that where women earn and control cash, they are found to spend it on the family's basic needs, especially food while men spend at least a part of their earnings on tobacco and liquor (Mencher and Saradmoni, 1982; Arya and Samra, 2001).

CONCLUSIONS

Sericulture offered rural women a livelihood by engaging them in an economic participation both as paid and unpaid labour. This explains the feminisation of sericulture work force. Economic participation helped them to overcome the image of women as unpaid domestic workers to major contributors to their household's wellbeing. Women involved in sericulture activities had shown presence of strong agency and adaptability to any fluctuations in the industry. Participation in silkworm rearing had created networking amongst themselves as well as an access to resources such as land, credit and market, thereby increasing their control over decision making particularly on their earnings and spending. Sericulture had shown a strong potential for empowering women economically. Though the conditions of life and work available to women in sericulture are better as compared to women in many

other work groups, it is seen that even they have not been able to completely break away gender barriers and lead a completely empowered life.

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