

The Impact of Women Empowerment Programs on Upcountry Tea Estate Women in Sri Lanka

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Abstract

The term ‘women empowerment’ is a popular concept in the development discourse. However the empirical data regarding empowerment is not much available. Therefore, this study has focused on assessing the impact of women’s empowerment programs which were implemented in the estate sector by the government as well as by NGOs in Sri Lanka. Basically, the study has focused on two main empowerment programs called Plantation Development Program (PDP) and Plantation Community Empowerment Project (PCEP) by the Government and the Care International as well. Most of the development plans do not assess the effect of empowerment programs that can be implemented within communities. Therefore, the objective of this study was to examine the ongoing approaches and the strategies related to empowerment of women.

Introduction

‘Empowerment’ is a widely spread concept in all aspects of development approaches which has been identified as a strategy of poverty reduction by the World Bank in 1990 (World Development Report: 1990). The word ‘empowerment’ is prominently used in relation to women, ethnic minorities and other marginalized groups with a view to providing them strength and confidence.

The United Nations decade for women (1975-1985) captivated public attention on the vital role play by the women in socioeconomic development. Subsequently, the concept ‘women empowerment’ emerged rapidly as a significant arm and slogan for the 1990s. Women empowerment is an active, multidimensional process which should enable women to realize their fully progressed identity and use their power in all spheres of life. It would consist of greater autonomy in decision-making, greater ability to plan their lives free them from shackles imposed on them by customs, beliefs and practices” (Devi: 1998: p. 44).

All UN member states who signed the Millennium Declaration are committed to promote gender equality and empowering women. Consequently, empowerment became one of the key constituent elements of poverty reduction and an important assistant factor in achieving development goals. Women’s socioeconomic

condition can be improved only if they could be entitled to equal rights with men. As a result of the above mentioned universal changes regarding women, Sri Lankan women development policies also have undergone tremendous changes in the recent past and even the state policies have become somewhat more pro-women.

Women in Sri Lanka have engaged themselves in different economic activities. Among different labour categories women in the tea plantation sector is one of the most marginalized and exploited group of workers in Sri Lanka. Poverty among the Sinhala population was clearly below average while poverty among Tamils and Moors was clearly above average and the Indian Tamils, who were on average less than one fifth below the poverty line (Gunewardena: 2007: p.20). In terms of wages, their wages are just above bare minimum. There is a whole regimentation of work too. Plantation sector shows that the working conditions for men and women are vastly different due to the type of work done by men and women. Despite wage and social differences women even undertake male tasks also. Women work longer hours than men. They work eight hours beginning at 8 a.m, and excluding the time spend weighing their baskets of tea leaves twice a day. Men in tea plantation sector work only till around 1.00 p.m. It is considered to be an equal wage for both men and women, it is not so as women work two and a half hours a day more than men. Men normally finish their day's work early. To earn more income and also to overcome poverty, women are working during holidays. Finally most of the women's salary is taken by the male members of the family (Kandasamy: 2001: pp.28-30). Estate women are overburdened with household work, routine duties, communal, religious and social obligations too. According to the above mentioned facts, estate women are marginalized and power less in every aspect of their lives when compared to other women groups in Sri Lanka. Sri Lankan government collaborate with Plantation Human Development Trust and the NGOs have implemented several programs to empower estate women.

Research Methodology

The objective of this study was to examine the ongoing approaches and the strategies for the empowerment of women and the nature of impact that has been caused to empower estate women. This study was carried out in two estates called 'Poyston' and 'Carolina' in Ambagamuwa Divisional Secretariat Division in Nuwara Eliya District, Sri Lanka.

This research has collected both qualitative and quantitative data. A household survey together with Key Informants' Interviews (KIIs), Focused Group Discussions (FGDs) and observations have been used to collect data. The household survey sample was focused on 200 estate women and their family units. The sample has been selected by using the systematic sampling method. Systematic sampling is "introducing a system of

selection of people. The researcher’s choice of people from the electoral register is choosing every case” (Denscomb: 2007: p.145). Therefore, the sample has been selected based on the Child Development Officers Register.

To measure empowerment, this study has used five components which indicate the levels of empowerment. They are welfare, access, awareness, participation and control (Pravin:2005, Sahay:1998, Longwe:1990). Welfare denotes the living condition of women. Access is the possibility to obtain services or commodities. Awareness involves the knowledge of legislations and empowerment programs. Participation represents the involvement of women in decision-making process at home and at political arena. Finally, control is the ability of sharing resources equally. Thus, women are in a better position to control their lives today. These were the key indicators that were used to measure the empowerment situation of estate women.

Analysis of Data

1. Welfare situation of the target sample

Availability of basic requirements is considered as an indicator to ascertain as to how many respondents do possess all basic necessary requirements. Basic need strategy emphasizes the well-being of human beings including women. It pays special attention to the needs of women since it relieves household drudgery which is an important step in the empowerment of women.

1.1 Availability of Basic Necessary Requirements

Availability of water is one of the basic requirements and also an indicator of measuring a good living condition. Using safe drinking water contributes to reduce the incidence of poverty. For the factors such as source of water, distance from home, availability and the acceptability have been checked in the study.

Table 1: Source of Water

Source	Drinking		Bathing		Cooking		Washing Cloths	
	Poy	Caro	Poy	Caro	Poy	Caro	Poy	Caro
Tap	100	61	100	58	100	58	100	58
Common Tap	-	37	-	40	-	40	-	40
Common Well	-	2	-	2	-	1	-	1
Private Well	-	-	-	-	-	1	-	1

Source: *Field Survey, 2010*

There were four sources of obtaining water namely tap, common tap, common well and private well. From Table 1, it is clear that the respondents of Poyston Estate are having separate taps for the purposes like drinking, bathing, cooking etc. Majority of the respondents in Carolina have taps at home too. However, when compared to Poyston, for 40 of women in Carolina, there is one single common tap provided by the estate for their needs. For this common tap, they have to walk a little distance from their homes.

Water is available at their own home for every woman in Poyston. Therefore, the distance is considered as zero. Fifty nine women in Carolina too have water at their own door step. Fifteen respondents have to walk about 31-50 m to fetch water for their day to day work. Three of the respondents have to walk over 50 m for fetching water. For Poyston, water is available throughout the year. They have a water tank to store water. But water availability in Carolina is not comparatively satisfactory. Only 48 respondents are getting water throughout the year. Fifty of them have water during most parts of the year. It means, that for some months, they have to suffer from lack of water.

Electricity is also a basic requirement of human beings. When compared with the general situation in Estates, majority of the respondents in Carolina have electricity supply. The percentage is 92. Only a few (8) haven't got electricity. But the condition in Poyston is comparatively low. Electricity supply is not available for the houses provided by the TRUST. The houses have been given from 2008 to the estate workers but they have not been provided with electricity supply.

Sanitation is another basic necessary requirement of the people. Availability of individual latrine is at a satisfactory level at both selected Estates except for a very few cases. Every household has a separate latrine in Poyston. Only 6 households did not have latrines in Carolina. They share the latrines of their relations. However, the most unfortunate situation is that some are using the river for discharging faeces.

Having a separate kitchen also a basic necessity for human well-being. Earlier, the same area has been used for cooking and sleeping. But currently most of the houses are having separate kitchens.

Availability of basic requirements has been adopted in order to ascertain as to how many respondents have all basic requirements. According to the responses majority of respondents do enjoy all the basic requirements

Form of Violence in the Family/Society

As mentioned in the beginning, welfare denotes the living condition of women. Therefore, in addition to basic requirements, the form of violence prevailing in the family and the society is also taken into consideration.

Visible decrease in the level of any form of violence perpetrated on women and young girls is an important qualitative indicator that can be taken for evaluating the women empowerment.

Violence in the family may be due to various reasons but by and large, it denotes unequal power sharing within the family. The following data provide a glimpse of the nature of power distribution in a family today. Quite a few number of verbal violence can be identified in both estates. But no sexual violence is reported. The verbal violence is due to addiction of alcohol by males. Physical violence such as wife beating can be identified in both estates in a small scale. Only 3 women were found to have suffered due to their husbands' cruel behaviour. Violence against women has been significantly decreased in both estates. Through education and the awareness programs the way of their thinking is now gradually changing. The moral empowerment perhaps is the reason for the majority of women in the sample for not experiencing domestic violence. Another fact is that their children do not allow their parents to behave violently. Neighbours also mediate to solve those family problems to some extent. This feature represents how far the women enjoy their lives at their working places without encountering in any problems related to violence. Only 2 women are facing verbal violence at the working place, which is an insignificant figure. Due to creation of awareness regarding violence at working places and the good relationship prevailing between the employer and the employee, violence against women has become minimal. Women are more empowered today than in the past. Other forms of harassment includes underemployment, stopping of increments, transfers, etc.

2. Access

The component 'access' indicates both economic and socio-cultural independence. It represent how far the women are independent in general in their family units and the society too.

2.1 Economic Independence in Family

Women's decision-making power over the kind of work they are doing, the extend of income and expenditure remaining under her control or whether she is still being subservient to her husband in the family are the factors that have taken as qualitative indicators of women empowerment. No major difference concerning the above matter could be found in both estates. Majority of women in both Estates are fully independent (95/200) while 48 are partly independent and 57 are not economically not independent. Total number of women employed in the selected sample were 143. Generally women enjoy a better status once they start earning. Income creates status and at the same time reduces poverty level of women. Therefore, being employed is more important to get rid of vulnerability and the feeling of 'independence' is important since it helps women to look at their lives in a new angle.

Training in the relevant field is an important way that can empower women. Women are able to develop their skills through training which enable them to achieve high status with a better salary. In the overall, there were 19 women who have participated in training workshops in the fields of self-employment, accounting, pre-school management, volunteer training. Governmental, Non-governmental organizations and self-funded training courses are quite beneficial for their employment. Self employment and volunteer training has been provided by the CARE International. Accounting, and other vocational training has been provided by the PHDT. Management training is self-funded while the pre-school training has been provided by the government. Overall, these women are getting the support from both governmental and Non-governmental organizations. Though the number of self-employment training causes is very few; it denotes a positive change in the way of thinking of the estate women today. Today, young girls in the estates are willing to undergo various forms of training.

2.2 Right to Own Assets

Women need a range of assets and capabilities to increase their well-being and security, as well as their self-confidence. 'Assets' refers to material assets, both physical and financial such as land, housing, livestock, savings and jewelry. The extreme limitation of poor people's physical and financial assets severely constrain their capacity to negotiate fair deals for themselves. Only a very few women have the right of claim to the ownership of their house. That number is 14. It is generally the males who own the houses. Estate people do not have the land right. Estate management has provided estate houses to the workers. When born as a member of the estate community, people have the benefit of having a job and a house. Few respondents have their own bank accounts for saving. Fifty eight respondents are having their own bank accounts. Handling of their own bank account is a good change which signifies empowerment of women. The ownership of self-employment ventures are run by respondents in both Estates. 16 respondents run their own employment and their products are chilies, mushrooms and yoghurt. There were more respondents who are willing to start their own employment. Majority of these women has got the training and the financial support from the PHDT and some NGOs such as CARE and Barandina.

3. Awareness

The third indicator that has been used to measure women's empowerment is the level of awareness. It involves the knowledge of legislations, empowerment programs as well as health. The awareness level of sample respondents with regard to governmental and non-governmental welfare programs are also regarded as an important aspect.

3.1 Knowledge on Women Empowerment Programs

Knowledge of women empowerment programs is also applied as an indicator to measure the awareness level of the respondents. The awareness level of the sample respondents with regard to governmental and non-governmental empowerment programs in general and specifically programs like vocational training, self-employment schemes, bank assistance, family welfare, education for girls and household money management. It was found that only 7 respondents have better knowledge on vocational training in both estates. They possessed a better knowledge of self-employment than the knowledge of vocational training. Twenty eight women possessed knowledge on self-employment. Some of them have participated in these training programs while some have not. They have learned it from the other members. Forty two women have been engaged in banking and it reveals that they have the knowledge about dealing with banks. Twenty seven respondents are knowledgeable in family welfare activities in both estates. Knowledge of household money management was found to be at a satisfactory level among the sample respondents. Knowledge on education for female child was not at a satisfactory level

3.1.1 Knowledge of Legislation

The awareness level of the respondents with regard to various legislations aimed at protecting women's rights. Knowledge and awareness level on issues affecting the community at large, and women in particular such as women's reproductive rights, legal rights, property rights, marriage, health rights which are highlighted in empowerment programs are also qualitative indicators of empowerment. Knowledge of property right of estate women is quite satisfactory among the selected sample. Majority among those are having a knowledge about property rights which is found to be at a satisfactory level. However they didn't have much knowledge on divorce rights. Knowledge of widow remarriages appeared to be poor. Only 7 women were aware of their rights of remarrying a person of their choice. These women are having significant knowledge regarding inheritance rights. Especially, women who are working in estates are knowledgeable about the game. They know about the allowances, maternal leave and other maternal benefits that are entitled by married women. However, respondents' knowledge on labour rights is poor. Only one women who is working in a voluntary organization had a better knowledge of legislations. She is an exceptional case, I have met in the survey. Women possessing a good knowledge were those who participated in specific empowerment programmes and training courses. Except this kind of special cases, overall knowledge regarding women's rights is poor.

Overall women in the estates are currently knowledgeable of the family planning. “Not like earlier, nowadays we have to give a good education to our children. We can’t adopt our children the way of our parents did. So we have to think about the number of children today” (FGD, Female, Poyston, Hatton)

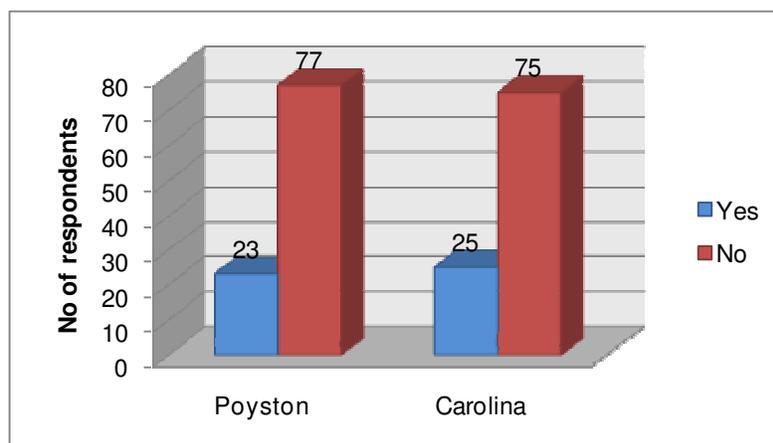
4. Participation

The fourth indicator for measuring empowerment is participation. Participation in empowerment programmes, decision-making, socio-cultural events, development of the area and the political participation has taken as the indicators to measure women’s participation.

4.1 Participation in Special Women’s Empowerment Programs

The following Figure illustrates the response regarding participation of women in empowerment program either any training workshop during the last 6 years.

Figure 1: Participation of Empowerment Program during the last 6 Years



Source: Field Survey, 2010

Nearly one fourth of the respondents in both estates have participated in women’s empowerment programs. Most of these programs were on self-employment, volunteer training, vocational training, gender training etc. Focused themes are identified as follows.

4.2 Participation for Decision –Making in the Family

One of the important features of empowerment is the involvement is decision-making. Therefore, to measure ‘participation’ this question has been put in order to understand ‘who were the decision-makers in the matters of the respondent’s family. To measure the decision making ability of females the research had used several

indicators such as decision making for financial matters, child education, saving, buying clothes... etc. Decision-maker responsible for financial matters at home. That person varies from estate to the estate. Thirty men are taking decisions in Poyston while the number of women is 23. Overall equal percentage of both husband and wife (30%) are taking financial decisions at home. In Carolina majority of women are taking decisions at home by themselves. In 18% cases, decisions are taken by all concerned parties because they are the extended families, sharing one budget. Parents and other are taking decisions on behalf of unmarried women. In the category of respondents who take decisions by themselves, widows and divorced women are also included.

Majority of parents (40) are taking joint decisions on child education. Both husband and the wife are involved in taking decisions when buying cloths. Moreover, joint decisions taking regarding saving and money management is high. Majority of the respondents indicted that taking decisions in matters relating to social needs involve 'both'. Taking decisions jointly by 'both' is a significant change indicative of the peaceful and compromising nature of family today. Family harmony as well as equal rights are quite evident in the sample.

4.3 Participation for Socio-cultural Events in the Society

Participation of women in socio-cultural events in the society emphasizes the nature of women's empowerment as well as the freedom of equal participation enjoyed by women in the estate sector today.

The level of women participation in socio-cultural events in both estates is in a satisfactory level while only a small number of women could not get the opportunity to participate due to male domination and lack of time.

4.4 Political Participation

Generally, women in Sri Lanka are reluctant in getting themselves involved in political and public decision making bodies. Sri Lanka has the worst record of women at the local and national level participation in politics among South Asian countries. Political participation is an indicator used to analyze the level of participation. To measure gender empowerment, the Gender Empowerment Measure (GEM) has also included in political participation of women as an indicator. Therefore, political participation [the number of members involved in politics and the nature of their membership in political parties] have been taken into consideration in this study too.

A very few females have enrolled as members of the Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC). Majority of women do not like to enroll as members of any political party. Though the number of women representing a political

party is small it can be taken as a positive change that has occurred among estate women today. Similar change can be identified from both estates.

Table 2: Nature of the Membership

Nature of Position	Number
Area Organizer	2
Regional President	1
Member	8
Total	11

Source: *Field of Survey, 2010*

The nature of membership is considered as an indicator to ascertain whether women have been able to reach high positions in political parties. But the majority of them remain as ordinary members of the parties. Only 2 women in Carolina are holding the position of Area Co-ordinators.

5. Control

According to the women empowerment framework, ‘control’ is the ultimate level of equality and empowerment. Here, the balance of men and women should be equal. At this stage women are able to take decisions over their lives and children and also she should be able to play an active role in the development process of the sector. Women are able to achieve the final level automatically by achieving the rest of the levels. Therefore, ultimate conclusion regarding control is little better among estate women today. The household survey data and the FGDs reveals that women are having fair self confidence in matters relating to their life. The economic independency, socio-cultural participation of the estate has taken as the perceptible indicators. Overall, welfare, access, awareness and participation indicate overall self-control and equal rights of estate women. It highlights the fact that the estate women are now enjoying equal rights in the society better than earlier times due to various empowerment programmes that has been implemented by the government, estate management and the NGOs.

This feature has been adopted in order to examine the level by women in participation for socio-cultural events. The ability of women to exercise their rights to develop the area indicates the level of ‘control’. In this respect, the situation of the estates is far better. Women are having fair opportunities to intervene in the development of the area. Participation in development and cultural events, decision-making ability as well as

the economic independency contributes to enhance self-esteem of women. Therefore, ultimately they are able to achieve the final level of the empowerment framework termed as 'control'.

Role of the NGOs in Empowering Women

CARE, PALM Foundation, Barandina, Penvimoshanam, Sinhala Demala Gemi Kantha Sammelanaya are the active NGOs in the research area. These NGOs have implemented number of programs to empower estate community. Programs such as road development, providing sanitary facilities, providing loans can be identified as the special benefits that the women are able to derive from these NGOs.

Among those NGO programs, Plantation Reform Project (PRP), Plantation Community Development Project (PCDP) as well as currently Plantation Community Empowerment Project (PCEP) with the support of the PHDT can be identified as special empowerment programs. Under the PRP they have established Information and Training Centre in 2005 in Poyston. But it does not function at present. It was a good opportunity for people to arrange their functions and training programs.

Community Development Forums (CDFs)

CDFs have been established by the CARE International under the PCDP, to build up relationship between the management and the workers regarding their matters. In an environment where the established leadership patterns are dominated by males (estate management, trade union leaders, kovil committees) and where women have less opportunity to voice their views on welfare and development matters, the CDFs can be identified as a mechanism that could fill the gap and few women members/volunteers have been able to develop their leadership. These CDFs are new channel of communication among all stakeholders in the estate communities. Particularly, they have provided a forum for direct communication and interaction between estate residents and the management. It can be identified as a central forum for dialogue and decision-making about community by conducting monthly meetings (Plantation Community Empowerment Project (PCEP): Description of the Action: CARE: p. 9). Estate manager, CARE agent and the members of the CDFs in every division are participating in these meetings. But the participation even for the CDFs is low due to lack of time and transportation difficulties in Poyston.

Especially, CARE Organization has trained a street drama team involving estate children. The themes are related to problems arising due to alcoholism. These dramas have influenced people to give up alcoholism to some extent. *"...Children are playing roles related to issues in alcoholism. They are working as changing agents in the estate"* (KII: Team Leader: CARE International: Nawalapitiya).

Most of the people in Sri Lanka today have their own postal address but not the estate community. They have a common mail address which is given by the management. But every house has its own postal address in Poyston today. CARE International has helped to provide postal address to them.

Conclusion:

The combined effort of the governmental and non-governmental organizations have created an atmosphere of concern for women. Moreover, along with government efforts, non-governmental organizations have started taking up women's empowerment as an issue. Within the last few years, NGOs began to play a major role within the estate sector to empower its community. However, women's participation for empowerment programs implemented by NGOs was not in a satisfactory level. Majority of them have been uplifted their lives through common welfare facilities such as housing, water, health and sanitation. Though they were having a number of opportunities to achieve better status in their life, there area number of socio-cultural obstacles pushing them to a corner which is preventing them from leading a better life. Dependent mentality, laziness, lack of participation, low education were some of those factors.

However, in the recent time women have achieved better status than earlier. Majority of women who achieved far better status are young in terms of age. Women in estates were currently playing an active role in the development of her family as well as the sector. Positive thinking such as health habits, education for their children and importance of saving were some of the progressive areas. In the overall, the economic and socio-cultural empowerment can be seen among few respondents.

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