

Empowering Rural Women in India during Covid-19: A Brief Study Considering Future Sustainability

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Abstract

Empowerment is a multidimensional process that fosters power in people to access available opportunities without limitations and restrictions. Rural Indian women like its urban counterparts are equally proactive in fighting the pandemic with proper planning, flawless execution and backbreaking work. This paper is subdivided into Part I and Part II. Part I mainly attempts to capture how the collective strength of women's SHGs has come to the fore in combating the disease. Women in remote areas have showed their sewing skills by supplementing Personal Protective Equipments (PPEs) for health professionals and administrative staffs in the field. Women Self Help Groups in different states have provided free meals to the weaker sections during the crisis period of lockdown. Part II of the paper focuses on the significant role of rural Indian women towards sustainability after Covid crisis.

Keywords: Self Help Group, Rural women empowerment, Covid crisis, sustainability.

Introduction

India witnessed women's indomitable courage, extreme patience and self-sacrificing spirit in winning the wars of Independence in the 19th and 20th century . In 2020, the country also recognizes that the war against the death-dealing disease has to be won through woman power in our homes, war rooms and frontlines. Like the female delegates, the role of women in rural corners is also immense in combating Covid-19 who have limited access to services, infrastructure, and opportunities and are subjected to greater socio-cultural restrictions.

Part I

Optimized productivity of Apparel Resources

From mid March to April, 2020, over 6377 protective gears equipments have been made by women of 26 Self Help Groups under the National Rural Livelihood Mission across districts of Madhya Pradesh, where around 4000 have been provided by 56 women from 3 villages (Khajra, Aam Chaupra and Balakot) of Damoh district alone. According to the Union Ministry for Rural Development, women are working hard in supplying Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) including aprons, gowns, masks, gloves, head caps and shoe covers based on orders and specifications of the health departments in 12 states like Uttar Pradesh, Punjab, Haryana, Himachal Pradesh, Odisha, Jharkand, Madhya Pradesh, Arunachal Pradesh, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, Telangana and Mizoram . A small tailoring unit known as Mangena Muthyalu Samajika in Lakkavaram village of Andhra Pradesh stood up to fight against Covid-19 by manufacturing PPE with the help of 240 women most of whom live below the poverty line . Everyday they produce 6000 shoe covers, 5000 lab coats and 15000 masks. This was made possible by 1M1B NGO focused on empowering and upskilling rural women. These women have come a long way from no livelihood to earning income of Rs. 6000 per month.

Community Kitchens

Women under local self governing bodies' across districts and states had been running community kitchens to ensure free foods to the weaker sections so that no one goes hungry during this crisis situation . Kerala's KUDUMBASHREE mission (one of the largest female community platforms) with 44 lakhs women members had been running 1300 kitchens across the state delivering food to the bedridden and people in quarantine. In Odisha, 6 lakh Mission Shakti SHGs had engaged 70 lakh women in Odisha to help around 45000 needy people by providing basic necessities like groceries, cooked food and dry ration. The Mukhya Mantri Didi Kitchen (MMDK) had been launched in Jharkand to provide free food to the needy households in the nearby villages of the state. Under MMDK, about 4185 community kitchens were running in the state.

Sanitizers

In Khunti district of Jharkand, Eight women under 'Sakshi Mandal' (SHG) are engaged in preparing hand sanitizers using medicinal plants and other ingredients to help keep coronavirus at bay. In Tiruchirapalli (also known as Tiruchi) a workshop was conducted during March,2020 and 70 women attended it to learn about the formula of preparing sanitizers. These women volunteers reached the target of supplying 20 litres of sanitizers to the health centres as per the district collector's office. This project not only helped Tiruchi in meeting the increased demand of sanitizers but also helped women in earning income. The Rural Women Technology Park (RWTP) in Jorhat district of Assam has become India's last Coronavirus warrior which has engaged rural women of the state to prepare mainly hand sanitizers and liquid disinfectants to be distributed freely among the poors in the nearby villages. Faced with an acute shortage of Ethanol (a spirit which is generally used up to 60%-70% as the base of any hand sanitizers) a group of tribal women has started looking for alternatives. Under a SHG named Sri Hari Ajeevika , they

are manufacturing organic hand sanitizers with the Mahua flower-based alcoholic drink, neem leaves and Gulab water.

ASHAs And Aganwadis

Various state governments started engaging some 900000 female community health workers called Accredited Social Health Activists (ASHAs) across the country who do not share the spotlight with the army of doctors and nurses but are right in the frontline of the war against the pandemic. The ASHAs have been putting their lives in danger, visiting door to door and spending hours in interviewing people and scribbling notes about maternal and child health and also educating families about isolation and symptoms of the virus.

The army of Aganwadi workers (AWWs) which serves as the backbone of the country's fight against malnutrition, is now fighting the toughest battles against COVID-19. AWWs are trained women who have been assigned the responsibility of local surveillance by recording travel history of migrants, noting flu symptoms and asking them to stay quarantined for 14 days. According to the Ministry of Women and Child Development, they are working day and night to deliver 'Take Home Ration' at doorsteps of beneficiaries across the country. In Maharashtra, under the Bharat Ratna APJ Abdul Kalam Amrut Yojana, AWWs are involved in delivering home cooked food to the vulnerables. In Panchkula district of Haryana, they have been engaged in collecting COVID-19 data from door to door and promulgating public welfare measures. In Karnataka they have been showing their stitching skills in producing masks for the destitute. India is now manufacturing over 200,000 PPE kits and 200,000 stand-alone N95 masks daily as reported by PM Modi. But these Aganwadi women and ASHAs are working often without PPE, going to people to tell them about the importance of using masks.

Part II

Role of rural women towards sustainability after Covid-19

Before the Coronavirus outbreak, most of the rural women were forbidden to participate in any activity outside due to larger societal and patriarchal norms. With half of the society lagging behind, the goals of sustainable development couldn't be achieved in India by 2030.

The current situation has changed the traditional system and opened a door to many possibilities. As we are adopting new habits in the changing world, there are increasing demand for sanitizers, hand washes and masks in rural areas. Rural women are taking part in the production of these items. Moreover, many male migrant labourers who are also the husbands of these women are now unwilling to go to work in the urban areas. Such situation demands participation of the whole family in the production of the sanitizers and masks. Hence the entire focus will be gradually shifted towards household-based production. The production of other items like daily soaps, shampoos, toothpastes, refined raw grains, flour etc. can be considered which can be prepared at home with little inputs and without manufacturing plants.

Without deconstructing patriarchal mindset of the society, it is impossible to reach the sustainability after Covid-19. Systematic effort and family support are needed on a regular basis which will increase the presence of women in the entrepreneurial arena.

Conclusion

During the pandemic, empowering rural Indian women is key not only to the well-being of families, individuals and rural Community as a whole but also to the greater economic productivity, given women's large participation in the self employment segments of the country's workforce. It is a high time where we have an opportunity to identify the contributions of such women who are fighting in curbing the crisis amidst the deluge of fear and negativity.

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