

# **Contemplating ‘leadership’ in models of women empowerment: thinking of transformative alternatives and possibilities<sup>1</sup>**

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Rural women and leadership have become as if, synonymous to each other, especially in contexts where women empowerment and agency is fostered as goals towards achieving economic and social prosperity. Women in collectivized units are mobilized not just as saviors of economic life of rural women but also trained as leaders who can build the capacity in themselves to be able to understand one’s own rights and create a language of justice, women’s protection and safety. This paper is an attempt to contemplate on the existing models of training women as ‘leaders’, the nuances of the exclusions that are made in such a practice as well as what gets lost for the women leaders even as they identify themselves as the ‘leader didi’. So perhaps what becomes important in the paper then, is not just about the motivations of these women to continue to remain as leaders but also the complex negotiations – from envy, guilt to the inability cope and also the burden of ‘leadership’, that color the lives of these women leaders. Perhaps then the attempt is to shift the gaze from seeing empowered women as only women leaders to seeing them as just ‘women’ in rural contexts, with its own biases, oppression and possibilities. Where women could also be oppressors, be excluded and yet have the possibility of creating something in a collective space, which both could be good or bad at the same time. The effort here is to point out to the uncertainty of the categories made certain up till now, the woman and the collective. The rural woman as the given victimized poor woman and the collective of woman as the only way to her upliftment perhaps needs to be challenged. This work attempts to show through the deep, intimate engagement with the women leaders and non leaders about this dynamic, complex interplay between what an empowered woman is and what ought to be an empowered woman? Perhaps the discourse only is about what the woman ought to become, or ought to be seen as and hence this work pushes the boundaries of this discourse, to see woman in her fragmented everyday-ness and not only as the leader. The work has then attempted to break the hitherto marked necessary relationship between woman and leader to become empowered,

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because what also stands important is the process through which women ‘become’ leaders or not become leaders. In that sense, how do we rethink woman (leader), leadership and empowerment.

This work was a part of the MPhil (Women and Gender studies) research work, based on an intensive ‘field work’<sup>2</sup> conducted in Hoshangabad district, block Kesla, Madhya Pradesh. The work examined the practices of empowerment and its strategies at the ground level, in villages and at the block level, through following the work of the block level women’s federation- Narmada Mahila Sangh (NMS). NMS has been functioning in Kesla for more than 20 years now, created through the efforts of the development NGO in the area. NMS has hitherto churned out a huge number of ‘women leaders’ through the Self help group (SHG) model, across various villages in the block. The work critically pursued the functions of empowerment strategies and goals, with its gains and limitations and arguing for an uncovering of the deeper layers embedded in the hegemony of a certain ‘kind’ of training of the rural woman. Whether this be a training to be an ‘agentic’ woman who has a ‘voice’, or it be about building her inbuilt ‘capability’ to save money and bring more income thus to the household. The narrative of SHG was usually peddled in, by saying that more the money, more the options to spend it. The underlying assumption, being that the woman can and will inherently always ‘save’ money, even if she ‘owns’ the most limited amount. The work has thus attempted to unfold these practices in order to understand ‘what of’ empowerment effects (and affects) women in their everyday lives. It has attempted to understand how do women navigate and negotiate their way around their lives, in struggle, labor, fears or even happiness. To talk about this process of negotiation which gets lost in the reflection of state policy and interventions, where the task is only to present a ‘happy’ smiling woman. A specific third-worldization<sup>3</sup> is also attached to this representation, which assumes that the only way the third world woman could be uplifted is to invest in her, *bank* upon her, towards ‘saving’ money, mobilize her to gain ‘voice’ and mobility, as that presents a good image of ‘gender equality’. Thus far women had been excluded from the development discourse, so let us include them? The problem that however remains is that the status quo and hegemony doesn’t get

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<sup>2</sup> In the work throughout, I question the anthropological leanings attached to ‘field work’ and try to rethink its understandings of ‘field’, ‘field work’ and ‘methodology’ through feminist, psychoanalytic and practical philosophy thinking.

<sup>3</sup> I refer here to the specific development and aid interventions in the Third world countries, which push for a certain kind of representation of women. Women often are represented only as poor, victims of abuse and violence and dependent on their families for everything. And development and aid interventionist discourse harps only on this and not the complexity of different contexts. This the Third world feminist scholars have referred to as the ‘Third Worldization’ of women in third world countries (Mohanty, 1984).

altered. Women continue to live and survive in patriarchal families and relationships. Even though empowerment missions often invoke an internal questioning through leadership trainings, but it also always puts them at a life-risk of subverting the deep-seated traditions that they end up confronting. One woman had said to me during my stay in the field that, “a sword is always hanging by our heads, for the kind of work that we do”. But the missions do not really provide the support that women would need, in this kind. For instance they would just end up fire-fighting with traditions, culture and communities at their own risks.

At other times there would be instances when women would envy each other because one got more public eye than the other. Sometimes when they would just not manage to cope with the responsibility of the empowered woman leadership, they couldn't help but complain. Perhaps then the attempt in this paper is to reflect critically on the nature of leadership itself in the models of empowerment, which both usually an individualized, competitive idea of the empowered woman leader and how could we move towards rethinking this model of leadership in transforming lives of women. In other words how could we move towards rethinking the nature of women's collectives itself? Can there be a possibility in which leadership gets redefined among collectives of women, in building on a 'relationship' of care and steering a movement towards transformative living? This would remain the imagination of *a praxis* in the paper.

## I.

The work of the development organization in these sites has been about building Self Help groups (savings-credit groups) ranging from 3-6 in each village (depending on the size of the village) and has conglomerated them into the structure of federations in five blocks across the two districts. The context of these villages largely comprises of both Adivasi and Dalit households, with both communities existing more or less in each village in lesser or higher numbers. My 5 month stay involved close observation with women of the federation (Narmada Mahila Sangh) in the Kesla block, in the Hoshangabad district. My engagement remained in slowly entering this space of the federation, their activities, practices, the lives of women involved, to understand its functioning processes, its structure, its engagement with the economic, the state, the development sector and the lives of other women within themselves. I interacted with many women, but also attempted to build close relationships with some of the older women leaders, to understand their struggles and challenges, who continue being part of

the federation. I would regularly attend their federation meetings, visit their households, and accompany them on their journeys to make other SHG's to different villages. Often in these intimate conversations that we would have, I would witness the nuances, complexities and problems of some women becoming leader didis. There were many things, but perhaps they also continued because it wasn't easy to let go off of a higher status that was difficultly acquired. There were accounts shared of envy with other women, who maybe gathered more limelight, or there was a general dislike because of their caste/tribe location etc. Often in these conversations, one could always hear the echo of who is the good empowered woman and who is not. In one of the training and collective meeting that I was able to witness, there were repetitive connotations of what a 'good' (who is also happy) empowered ('Mazboot' nari) woman would do. She would be someone who regularly comes for the SHG and federation meetings, engages with institutions to understand one's rights (primarily as a poor, state beneficiary) to demand one's right in one's household, to live with health and hygiene, to become fearless in every aspect of her life and to become a respectful member of the community and family.

In a travel encounter with women from SHGs, some of whom hold Panchayat office positions (as Sarpanch and Panch), they complained about this another woman (also an SHG member) with us who was travelling with her two young children. Instead of helping this woman in taking care of her children, the women kept on disparaging her about how she is not a 'good woman' (mother) as she doesn't know how to take care of her children. They were disappointed and argued why she couldn't be wise enough to take some gap in the birth of her second child. 'What was the hurry?' they said. She was clearly out-casted and excluded by being labeled the irresponsible and the unhygienic one, as she couldn't take care of her children in a healthy and 'hygienic' way. Perhaps then, the woman who was the Sarpanch, wasn't necessarily ethical in her relationship with other women.

In another event, which is an annual gathering of women of all five blocks, across the two districts, one can get a sense of some of the processes that the collective of women inhabit in their togetherness as well as leadership amongst them. This collectivity is called and celebrated as the 'Mahadhiveshan', translating into a grand congregation of women. It is celebrated in the spirit of the women's collectivity and their strength in its collectivity. The women who are a part of this festival are only those women who are part of Self help groups which are included in the

federation structure at the five locations. It is a show of huge numbers of women together, especially when they invite government officials, district collectors and locally influential people (primarily men) to be a part of this *sammelan*. In the year 2016, their special guest was the Chief Minister, whose team got the venue shifted in the last one week due to security concerns of the big man. It is interesting to follow the events that ensue in the making of this huge event 'successful', however success in what and whose terms. All attempts were made to make the comfortable landing of the Chief Minister's helicopter as opposed to the comfortable stay of the scores of women who had come for this event. They were sitting cramped and 'disciplined' throughout the event, so that the entry and the exit of the CM go well.

It was clearly also an event marked by hostility, bitterness and disappointment among many women in the way things proceeded. Many women were angry and annoyed about the way some women leaders got to be on the stage with the CM, getting photos clicked with him and it would be their photos that would then get published in the local newspapers, whereas many others did not get that chance.

There was use of meanings and references to marriage and birth of the girl child which was incessantly used to describe the event and hence marked its celebratory mode. However one kept wondering whether the celebration was really about poor rural women coming together, or it was about the Chief Minister and other big officials attending their event, whether the ecstasy was around women collectivity or was it just about any other festive gathering like marriage itself, whether it was about the promises that they would make to each other as women part of federations or was it about the promises that the CM would make to them, addressing the crowd of women as his sisters and nieces, talking about setting up the marriages once a girl child is born as his duty and being applauded at it. In that sense, the norms of the 'good woman' and here the good empowered woman had certain parameters, where she was married, took care of the family and household and was vocal, agentic and worked for the betterment of the society and world at large. Anyone outside these institutions of patriarchy was 'excluded'.

As the event translated into the show of women's numbers, power, confidence, commended by the CM, as opposed to their 'shyness and incapability', it was the men of the community who were getting insecure of the address to women by the officials. There were also accounts heard of men talking about raping and molesting women who stood and handled the stage.

A local newspaper reported the Chief Minister saying (in relation to the NMS) saying “10,000 Mahila ghar aur duniya sambhal rahi hain” (10,000 women are taking care of their homes and the world). Another newspaper reported “Anpadh mahilayo ne kiya badha mahadiveshan” (Illiterate women organized a huge event-Mahadiveshan). But this has largely been the conception of ‘women’, whether empowered or not, she is ‘remembered’ as illiterate and a care taker of the family and now also of the world, especially if she is a rural woman.

Even as the women were remembered as illiterate and as care-takers of family and household, they were burdened by the pressures of performing the role of the empowered woman leader. Often women would tell me how they were not managing to earn because they were required to come for meetings or planning processes and they wanted leave the federation or the federation posts that further required them to perform. Often they would be called for ‘exposure visits’, very common within development organizations, whose sole purpose was cross-exchanges and inter-learning amongst organizations and different contexts. However it ended up becoming a burden for these women where they repetitively told and talked about the same stories and narratives, which had lost value for them as well as the meaning of it, except being a burden.

So how would we see women leaders in this light, who perform repetitive labor, are overburdened, are competing for the ‘stage’ presence and are envious of their fellow women? In this triad of (empowered) woman, leader and collectivizing of women, perhaps we need to think how to rethink and transform our practices of engagement with women. Where creating women leadership would take us to a certain definite route of change, but could we begin to ask the question whether this change is really good for the women who get excluded? Maybe we need to backtrack few steps and understand the process in the process. What would be the praxis that would transform the nature of relationships among women? What would be nature of the collective of women which would not necessarily mirror masculine characteristics? And what would it mean to foster the understanding and meaning of ‘care’ and empowerment together, in women’s collectives? Perhaps there lies the imagination of a transformative praxis.