***Incentives and Motives for women taking leadership positions in collectives***

***Towards evolving A Synthesis***

***Bikalp Chamola, SJ Phansalkar***

**Introduction**

Women’s collective organisations (WC for short) take many forms: Self Help Groups (SHGs), “Mahila mandals”, co-operatives for undertaking or supporting economic activity. Such WC are floated by promoting organisations (PO). They may have the form of a registered entity or remain an informal association of women members. These may be unitary or Federal. The objectives of these collectives also vary: savings and credit; joint or group economic enterprises, pooled marketing; acting as a local pressure group for getting entitlements; advocating for gender justice; countering gender-based oppression and violence or facilitating literacy. The nature of these goods varies and straddles across all the four types: private, common, toll and public. Thus some of these WC produce and strengthen private goods; some produce and strengthen common goods and others produce public goods.

The following features run common among all / most of these WC:

* Membership of the WC is usually voluntary and often without any joining fees;
* Membership is often based on affinity principle;
* The leadership of the WC is from among the members;
* Leadership is usually through a process of selection at times after consultation among members;
* Leadership is usually an unpaid role save for reimbursement of expenses involved
* Leadership is in principle at least “rotational”

While membership entails attendance in periodic meetings and participation in gatherings or other forms of collective activities at higher tiers of the Federal structure; if any; leadership role entails a much more significant investment of time and energy on the part of the leader. The tasks may include: liaising with the promotional organization; keeping the village flock together; making local arrangements for meetings and other events; providing hospitality to outsiders including staff of the PO, visitors such as trainees, researchers and so on; traveling to district or other towns for meeting; training programs, extending the movement to other villages. While PO have fairly elaborate strategies and practices for ensuring continuing involvement of the leaders and members, a functional need could often drive these. The question of what are the incentives for members and leaders to ensure that they continue to participate and make the WC effective is seldom formally raised and studied. Studies of personalities of leaders are abundant, but the study of actual incentives available and their merit in the eyes of the leaders are rare.

**The relevance of understanding leadership in the collective organisations**

In recent years, the term social capital has been transposed from sociology and has found increased usage in everyday life while also being viewed as a panacea to most maladies in the context of developing societies (Portes, 1998). Portes also clarifies that the idea that participation in groups can have positive consequences is not a new idea and dates back to Durkheim’s idea of group life as an antidote to anomie or self-destruction and Marx’s distinction between an atomised class in itself and a more mobilised and effective class for itself. Bourdieu while defining social capital asserted that “the profits which accrue from membership in a group are the basis of solidarity that makes them possible” (Bourdieu 1985, p.248), thereby clearly delineating the nature of the social relationship and the quality of benefits which accrue from them. In expounding on key factors encouraging the formation of social capital Coleman articulated the enabling factor as “when relations among actors change in ways that facilitate action” (Coleman 1990, p.304). The importance of collective action has classically been centred primarily in the resource-deprived regions and has been viewed from the resource economics perspective. Scholars have viewed public goods provision as a problem of cooperation between self-interested actors, thereby implying that in a context in which public goods are non-excludable, rational, self-interested actors would rather free ride than cooperate (Olson, 1965). In the literature on collective action, several approaches have been construed to overcome this classic paradox of co-operation. Some have spanned into characterising the nature of the common good, the others have delved deeper into understanding the motives of the actors and the beliefs they hold about each other (Baldassarri, 2015). In order to foster co-operation among actors, scholars have identified group solidarity, the threat of sanctioning, reciprocity, and repeated interactions as key factors (Ostrom, 2005). Sociologists in the past have also viewed collective action emerging out of “free spaces” and highlighted the need to comprehend associational ties in specific contexts to understand the emergence of collective action. In particular Evans and Boyte mention:

“Particular sorts of public places in the community, what we call free spaces, are the environments in which people are able to learn a new self-respect, a deeper and more assertive group identity, public skills, and values of cooperation and civic virtue. Put simply, free spaces are settings between private lives and large scale institutions where ordinary citizens can act with dignity, independence and vision” (Evans & Boyte, 1992)

The focus here is on the processes of collective action, which primarily involves social mobilisation. Social movement in itself is a product of social capital and free spaces that exist in any given social group. The free spaces provide activist with the dense network of interactions to build collective action (Polleta, 1999). While repeated interaction and social networks are considered key to understanding collective action, sociologists have attempted at moving beyond the observation that social relations matter to collective action to studying the mechanism that enhances collective outcome (Baldassarri, 2015).

Women centred microfinance programs which focus on group-based lending and saving have become a worldwide phenomenon. They have become increasingly prevalent in India and have been viewed as key interventions in ameliorating the economic status of marginalised women. While economic empowerment is seen as the major thrust of these programs, the simultaneous development of social ties among women through the reinforcement of mutual trust and reciprocity have recently started to feature in the literature prominently. As a subsequent corollary, the focus on women’s empowerment to becomes important to these intervention. Women’s empowerment can be defined as women’s capacity to increase self-reliance, their right to determine choices, and their ability to influence the direction of change by gaining control over material and nonmaterial resources (Moser, 1989) Studies have suggested that such microfinance programs due to their group based structures, do have the potential to challenge the gendered practices of social exclusion also (Sanyal, 2009). Sanyal also elucidates that microfinance programs can, in fact, lead to generation of social capital through three theoretical formulations a) “Continuing economic relations often become overlaid with social content that carries strong expectations of trust” (Granovetter 1985:490); b) the accumulation of formal rules and informal behavioral expectations facilitates the extension of group activities into unintended domains (Hechter 1987); c) “Focused” interactions (Goffman 1967) that occur in “encounters” may be another source of social capital (Turner 2000:135) (c.f. Sanyal, 2009 ). Continuing the same line of thought, leaders within the structure of these microfinance programs, play the function of ‘key actors’, inducing the norms, and sustaining collective practices among the members. Therefore, we aim at developing an understanding of the nature of leader-leader and leader-member interactions, and the motives and incentives that operate on the minds of leaders while taking decisions.

**Method, materials and inferences**

Three fieldwork-based studies were conducted in this exploration. These are (Chamola, 2018); (Jaipal Singh, 2018) and (Chamola, Singh; 2018). This paper is an attempt to make a synthesis of these studies. Fieldworks were conducted in four locations, Kesla, Madhya Pradesh; Hazaribagh, Jharkhand; Alwar, Rajasthan; and Dausa, Rajasthan. In each of these locations, leaders in the collective were identified and interviewed using an interview schedule. We categorise the set of incentives into three categories economic (direct and indirect), social and moral. In our understanding, motivation is what encourages a person to be a leader; incentives are what make her continue to work as a leader and perform diverse roles. Background of each of the federations covered through this study is presented below:

1. Sangarsh Mahila Federation in Alwar district and the Saheli Samiti in Dausa district were the sample sites. The Sangarsh Mahila Manch (SHG federation), promoted by IBTADA was registered in Dec 2006 under Trusts Act. However, the design of the organisation was kept like a cooperative where two representatives from each cluster form the Representative Governing Body and eleven members from them are elected as members of the Executive Committee. The members of the EC are also the Trustees. They have the provision of changing 1/3rd trustees every year. IBTADA in 2009 started discussions with SHG leaders, and the Federation leaders were given responsibility to lead these discussions in the clusters and the cluster leaders in SHGs. In 2014, IBTADA stopped attending the meetings of the SHGs, and the Clusters and the leaders were asked to take care of the basic operational issues like maintaining the quality of groups, ensuring timely repayments, proper bookkeeping.
2. PRADAN promoted the Saheli Samiti in Dausa district. PRADAN started its work of promoting SHGs in 1998. Saheli Samiti was registered as Charitable Trust in 2007, but the constitution of the Trust is more like a cooperative where Executive Committee is elected from the leaders of the SHGs. In addition to the EC, there is a Representatives General Body comprising two reps from each VO. Presently Saheli Samiti is working in about 30 villages and has a membership of about 2300 women.
3. The Damodar Mahila Mandal Sangh (DMMS) today comprises of three subsidiary federations from the blocks of Barhi, Padma and Chauparan in the Hazaribagh district of Jharkhand. Over the last 25 years, roughly 10000 women have been associated with the Mandal. PRADAN promotor of the federation began its work in the Padma block in the year 1992. The Padma block federation is named as ‘DMMS-Padma’ and has roughly 250 SHGs within its fold. The Block has eight-gram panchayats of which, the federation is active in seven. The total number of members in the federation today is 3000.
4. The Narmada Mahila Sangh (NMS) comprises of federations of five blocks from Betul and Hoshangabad districts of Madhya Pradesh. Each of the blocks has its federation, which is run by a managing committee of elected representatives. We undertook the study in the Kesla chapter, which was registered under the societies act. These federations have been promoted by PRADAN and are over 20 years old.

These federations operate as three-tier federations and do not have a formal structure at each level of the tier. However, each tier comprises of an elected representative from the lower tier and hence functions on a democratic principle of decision making. The leadership therefore rather than being a unitary entity becomes a collective decision-making process among the leaders of the different tiers. Therefore we theoretically divide the set of leaders into four categories based on the functions they perform, the top formal leadership, the formal positions of leaders in the collective, bridge leaders and organisers.

**Primary inferences**

The studies from Kesla and Hazaribagh highlight the importance of economic incentives, over social and moral incentives in members taking up leadership positions in the collectives. These incentives tend to vary with both age and the position in the collective. We aimed at differentiating between generalised altruism and group solidarity by analysing the responses on the behaviour of leaders towards the members of the collective and non-members. Although at an abstract level, almost all the respondents agreed on the importance of generalised altruism in determining their motive for taking up leadership positions, a finer look at the data provides enough evidence to suggest that this, in fact, is not generalised altruism but a feeling of group solidarity with the other members in the collective.

While both the collectives have a similar timeline and have been promoted by the same organisation (thereby keeping the imbibed institutional practices similar), there are significant differences in the composition of members of the collectives. The members of the federation in Kesla come from both scheduled tribal (ST) as well as well scheduled caste (SC) communities, whereas in Hazaribagh it is predominantly the SC and OBC communities. This has a significant role to play in understanding the social incentives. In Kesla, the leaders at the managing committee level, define social prestige to be a dominant feature in their having taken up the leadership position in the collective. Due to a considerable diverse set of social backgrounds of the members, the leadership position helped them enhance their ‘status’ not just within the collective but also in the immediate social context.

Additionally, the improvement of the economic condition of the family, through easy access to loans, also further enhanced their position within the household as well. It was further affirmed, that such an improvement of social status is very closely associated with improvement in economic conditions of the families of leaders. The non-homogenous character of the leadership in Kesla also gives rise to ‘factions’ among the decision making leaders. These factions have led to the development of certain power centres among the leaders, which results in significant divergences over important decisions among the group. This has also led to leaders dropping out of their positions and becoming reticent. The members from the tribal community have expressed more importance to the feeling of generalised altruism than group solidarity. While their affiliation to the leadership comes from group solidarity, they cite generalised altruism repetitively as their reason for taking up the leadership positions. While earlier the leaders were paid an honorarium for attending meetings/ training/forming SHGs, currently with PRADAN having receded from the day to day activities, the leaders only receive the honorarium for the formation of new SHGs in the region. All the interviewed leaders reported this to have had an impact on their involvement with the federation. With the federation having expanded its work in recent years from only financial transactions to undertaking issues of social importance such as domestic violence and violence against women, the tacit expectation of leaders playing a more central role has increased.

In Hazaribagh, the leaders have significantly improved their economic status through the SHGs. This is easily manifested in the increase in the weekly saving amount. In fact some of the leaders have formed separate self-help groups, for women interested in saving more money than other members, leading to the situation of having a ‘privilege’ among them. Among the leaders of the federation, the affinities towards each other are much higher than that among leaders in Kesla. Significant promotion of livelihood based activities by PRADAN and subsequent failures of them has led to an overall lack of trust in the activities of the collective, which the leaders have to subdue through meetings and training constantly. Therefore, the leaders spend more time than earlier to convince members to continue to remain as members of the collectives. This, in the wake of receiving no honorarium for the activities, has been reported by all to be a situation in which they are pushing their boundaries. As the federation has been involved in activities about social justice, the leaders have reported social prestige as an important factor in their continuing with leadership positions. In the wake of an incident on social issues, the women leaders in their immediate social surroundings receive much appreciation for the work and are acknowledged by the community. The responses on group solidarity have been very strong among the leaders, however regarding generalised altruism, the members have reported that they do not consider generalised altruism to be of any importance in their continuing the work as leaders.

In both the locations, significant divergences exist among the leadership tiers. For instance, leaders working as *Haqdarshaks*, receive an honorarium from the federation, whereas the leaders are working as Village representatives do not. These divergences have occurred due to the involvement of PRADAN in various project related activities. Therefore, even though the leaders under these projects are part of the federation, their incentive structures are still determined by the NGO. As these incentive structures vary, the leaders at different leadership positions exhibit a different view of their role as leaders. While, members at the managing committee level in Kesla, give importance to social incentives in addition to economic incentives, the leaders working as community data collectors or *Haqdarshak* consider only economic incentives to be of importance. Similar findings emerge from Hazaribagh too.

As both these federations are more than twenty years old, the age of the leaders plays a significant role in determining their motives for working as leaders. A gerontological analysis of the motives presents several insights. The older leaders of both the Kesla and Hazaribagh federation evoke memories of their association with the federation being centred on economic and social incentives. As the NGO had been carrying out livelihood based activities, the initial association saw an increase in the economic status of their households. However, subsequently, as this began to stabilise, the social incentives also started playing an important role. As most of these older leaders came from extremely low-income families and had gone through, abduction, child abuse they developed a tendency to find meaning and purpose to the activities about social issues. Therefore, generalised altruism for the older leaders too slowly became an important aspect of retaining leaders, despite an increase in expectation of work and diminishing economic returns. Divergence to this could be noted in Hazaribagh, wherein the former President of the federation receded from her leadership position and refused even to participate or provide advice to the current leadership. The advisory committee in the Hazaribagh federation consists largely of older leaders, who have now taken back significant roles within their households. Some run their own shops, the others have completely become reticent, while some still offer assistance when asked for. These differences easily get manifested when collective decision making is required.

Jaipal Singh, 2018 classify the pattern of leadership in the federations of Rajasthan into three phases.

First Phase (Initiation): The leadership role to members in SHGs is usually thrust upon them by other members. There is no rush among members to get elected/ nominated as leaders of the SHGs. Though it must be mentioned here that it might be because of the way SHGs were promoted by the NGOs (PRADAN and IBTADA). In other SHGs which were promoted under government programs like SGSY, DPIP (where there was the provision of the subsidy) we have heard and seen that there was a rush to take up the leadership role by a few influential members. Therefore the design of the program in which women organisations are formed is a significant factor in deciding the type of leadership. Equally important is the ‘way’ the promoting organisation dialogue with the community. In this case, it seems that the promoting organisations very clearly explained to the SHG members that there is no subsidy and decision of the members will be supreme. The SHG members who are a little bit literate, who can spare some time, who is articulate, confident and impartial is selected as office bearer/ leader of the group. The woman (who is selected as leader) discusses it within her family and takes their consent and then agrees to become a leader.

This is the time when the leaders need lots of hand-holding, training, exposure and nurturing. Leaders told that they do not need any payment or any monetary benefit for the leadership role, but they need training, knowledge and information.

Second Phase (Prime): After the first phase of 1-2 years is over, the leaders gain confidence, understand the importance of their role and have also gained recognition. They start taking deeper interest in the affairs of the higher level organisations like Cluster level Federations. This is their prime period as leaders, and they start asserting themselves in the affairs of the CLFs as well as in village affairs especially the matters related to women.

Here the primary motivation is that they can help other poor women by facilitating bank linkages, convergence with other government schemes/ programs and also taking up livelihoods activities for the benefit of SHG members. In other words, this is the real leadership role that they play, and at times they have differences with the staff of the promoting organisation.

They need training in managing the CLFs – planning, financial management, monitoring, and setting up administrative systems in CLF etc. Both the promoting organisations were clear in their thinking that the women collectives should be autonomous and should be managed by the leaders. So the promoters slowly reduce their active role and encourage the leaders to take up the responsibility of taking decisions. Leaders enjoy taking up responsibility, but at the same time, they also feel the need for guidance from the promoting organisation.

Third Phase (Hand Over): After about 5-6 years of playing leadership role the leaders are supposed to vacate their positions for new leaders. As there is no monetary compensation for their time spent as leaders, they also feel that now others should also take up the responsibility. They also start feeling that they should also be earning now. They strive for taking up the role of Community Resource Person or start giving more time in their livelihoods enterprises. However, some of the leaders also wish to continue mainly because they do not wish to carry the label of ‘removed leader’.

**Discussion**

The hypothesis put forward by promoting the organisation of creating sustainable community-based organisations by imbibing leadership behaviour among members has to a certain extent attracted debate in public space. In the context of imbibed behaviour (outsider) transformation through persuasion, the role of key actors becomes instrumental in determining the rules of the collective. These key actors, through the acquired agency, play a dynamic role in inducing the norms into the members and diffusing action within the collective. However, these key actors are identified by the promoting organisations through various persuasions, ranging from the intuition of the professional’s education standards of the members to a vague psychological analysis. In the context of the federated structures, these actors form a network, through which decisions are taken on key subjects about the well-being of the collective. Leadership is a relational concept, and can only be analysed by examining people’s interactions with others, and it is shaped by gender relations, religion, and culture. Through this study, we attempted at analysing the motives and incentives that persuade members of the federation to take up leadership positions. Our analysis presents two assertions. Firstly, the excessive burden of morality imposed upon leaders (thereby exemplifying their role as *Vanguards*), leads to a situation of burn out of motives among the leaders of the federation. In a situation where incentive structures are not explicitly mapped out in the collective, and ambiguity of purpose exists between the collective and the promoting organisation, the leaders tend to divulge their inability to undertake concerted efforts to manage the day to day affairs in the absence of any direct economic incentive. This becomes extremely important in the context of economic activities wherein economic activity might threaten the mutual trust among women in the federation. The significant differences in motives of older leader’s vis-à-vis the new further strengthen this assertion. The second assertion pertains to the durability of the incentives that exist within the collective. In order to define the very clear distinction between the role of a leader and member, specific incentives associated with these position need to be explicitly mentioned. While boundary conditions for the collectives are elucidated, the member-leader distinction regarding incentives needs to be better institutionalised.

Although this study is still ongoing, we have presented a synthesis of our findings and aimed at defining the contours of further research in this domain.

**References**

Baldassarri, Delia. 2015. “Cooperative Networks: Altruism, Group Solidarity, Reciprocity and Sanctioning in Ugandan Farmer Organizations.” *American Journal of Sociology* 121 (2)

Bourdieu, P. (1985). The Forms of Capital. In J. Richardson (Ed.), *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education* (pp. 241-258). New York: Greenwood.

Coleman, James S. 1990. *Foundations of Social Theory*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Evans, S. M., & Boyte, H. C. (1992). *Free Spaces: The sources of democratic change in America*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992.

Goffman, Erving. 1967. *Interaction Ritual: Essays on Face-to-Face Behavior*. Garden City, NY: Anchor.

Granovetter, Mark. 1985. “Economic Action and Social Structure: The Problem of Embeddedness.” *American Journal of Sociology* 91(3):481–510.

Hechter, Michael. 1987. *Principles of Group Solidarity*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press

Moser, Caroline. 1989. “Gender Planning in the Third World: Meeting Practical and Strategic Gender Needs.” *World Development* 17(11):1799–1825.

Olson, Mancur. 1965. *The Logic of Collective Action: Public Goods and the Theory of Groups*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press

Ostrom, Elinor 2005. *Understanding Institutional Diversity*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press.

Polletta F. 1999. ‘Free spaces’ in collective action. *Theory Soc*. 28:1–38

Portes, Alejandro. 1998. “Social Capital: Its Origins and Applications in Modern Sociology.” *Annual Review of Sociology* 24:1–24

Sanyal, Paromita. 2009. “From Credit to Collective Action: The Role of Microfinance in Promoting Women’s Social Capital and Normative Influence.” *American Sociological Review* 74:4.

Turner, Jonathan H. 2000. “The Formation of Social Capital.” Pp. 94–146 in *Social Capital: A Multifaceted Perspective*, edited by P. Dasgupta and I. Serageldin. Washington, DC: The World Bank.