

Moving from Silence to Speech: Role of Language in Women's Empowerment in an Indian Desert.

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SUMMARY:

The power of communication has improved the lives of migrant women who fled a conflict zone in Pakistan to seek refuge in the harsh conditions of the Thar Desert in the Indian state of Rajasthan.

Although the women possess exceptional embroidery skills, any potential to capitalise on this skill was hindered by the group's inability to communicate with potential buyers. The situation was compounded by their unequal status, limited exposure to markets, zero decision-making powers and no access to resources.

Despite unfavourable odds, the women battled against adversity and aided by improved language training programmes, provided through a development agency, they found themselves in a position to negotiate for their rights and have a voice in processes that affected their daily working lives.

Their improved communication skills also gave them the power to help the wider community. They now speak out against discrimination and inequalities that affect others and are now viewed as equal partners in development.

The women's mother tongue is *Thari* but they realised that if they want to deal with their clients who are Hindi speakers, and with the international market, they had to have a basic comprehension of a second language.

The ultimate goal of communication is to facilitate change in behaviour rather than merely disseminate information. To empower their lives through building their image and identity in the market place and beyond, the women had to utilise what they knew (information) and how they used that information (communication).

Consequently, the women learned the language and cultural needs of their buyers. This enabled them to negotiate improved pay which also improved the lives of their children. This involved more than just improving their basic language skills.

To be more effective they had to learn the technical language of the buyers, words that are related to their handicraft skills such as design, colour scheme, sample, cuts, approval, stitch, etc.

To achieve these aims, capacity building training was organized centred on language skills, decision-making, leadership, etc.

The multiplier effect of improved communication also means that the artisan's children are now studying in school; they are able to acquire better health and nutritional facilities, improved housing; and their expenditure capacity has increased.

Discussion:

Q. How did the other women in the community feel about the fact that this group of women have advanced, maybe more than them within the community?

A. When this change was seen it was not at all acceptable. The women started talking about making shift changes, about education issues, about children, about health. But gradually the community came to accept these changes and now they are supporting the women. The women are now earning and they are supporting their families. I went there and it was good to see that they had the men's support and the men are now working in the kitchen and helping care for the children.

Q. These women never thought they could use embroidery as a professional livelihood. Who made them realise that they could learn a language to speak to their suppliers, etc?

A. It was essentially a two-process. On the one side, the women were already working in the area and they realised they had the skills to make some money, so they asked the development agency (URMUL) for help. This embroidery work was not something that was introduced but the women never thought of having embroidery as their livelihood. The agency made them realise that they needed to acquire some form of language or communication training so they could speak to their buyers and suppliers. The society was traditionally a closed society and the women should not traditionally talk to men outside of the community. However, they could not progress without overcoming this barrier. The agency's approach was to take a small group of women to be trained in languages so they could act as a catalyst to help the others communicate.

Q. Do you have any other activities linked to the market and working with other organizations?

A. URLMU is facilitating. Women in the desert area live there and walk to the market to sell their products in the big cities, they have the market linkages. They are not working individually but through other groups. In India, after 2004, there was an amendment to the company act in which producers can also register their own company, so these artisans have their own registered company, so they can sell their product directly in the market without a middle agent.

Q. Are women not allowed to go to the market in Pakistan?

A. They are now. Women understand how the market works, from local to international markets – women are now going to international exhibitions, they are very exposed.

Comment: I would like to link a bit more to the language issue. Women are acquiring a level of confidence in the dominant language to be able to sell their product, but it's also important to recognise that their mother-tongue also helped the women to understand new concepts and ideas – to try to understand new concepts/ideas in another language make it more complex, so it is important to use the mother tongue to learn other skills and languages.

Comment: Basic literacy for girls seems to be the basic point from both presentations, especially in a situation of poverty. Literacy for girls can be a strong advocacy for empowerment. The Nepal case enlightened the linguistic diversity and cultural complexities. Each language had a different gender connotation and expectations in the gender roles – for women and girls. In the case of Nepal, it was very interesting to know that there were differences in the language between the two sexes – so what is the basis of discrimination based on sex in the society if language is not the cause? There was a question on whether proverbs can and should be used to empower instead of discriminate; the presenter welcomed this suggestion. Regarding the India case - there is debate surrounding when communication training and intervention should start for both women and girls. There are opponents who say that external people should not go into the community to intervene, but rather let the community take the initiative to raise its voice.

Key findings:

Women in India from poorer social groups traditionally accept their lowly status. The embroidery collective enabled one group of women to overcome social barriers that hindered their daily lives. Their new-found economic independence means they are now enjoying more freedoms and they have new confidence to help other oppressed women in the community to improve their lives. The group of women are a good example of a coalition for change that has been successful. When the women first started the initiative, many of the males in the community were opposed to the business, but when they saw that the women could earn an income from their embroidery activities, they gained greater acceptance and this has helped make the community more gender sensitive and gender equitable.