

Notions of Empowerment among Grassroots Women in India, the Philippines, Thailand and Fiji

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Across the countries of India, Thailand, the Philippines, and Fiji, grassroots women share more commonalities than differences in terms of how they view empowerment. While NGO language and economic, social, and cultural circumstances categorise these women as “grassroots” women, they actually share many of the same notions of empowerment that one might find in any women’s studies course: trust and capacity-building, recognising one’s rights, capacity of transforming the community, belonging to a group, promoting and communicating love, peace, and faith, and traveling to the wider world are all ways of feeling empowered.

INDIA

On an afternoon in India, a group of women from North East Network (NEN) took a break from their usual schedule of trainings on reproductive health, and advocating other gender rights.

The women of the NEN told stories of their struggles to reach the communities they serve. Personal contact and familiarity with both the members of the organisation and their tools for education were integral components in the efficacy of the women's campaigns, and therefore, in the women's own empowerment.

According to the women of NEN, empowerment is trust-building through the intimate, personal, and experiential qualities of face-to-face interactions.

Empowerment through Trust and Personal Interactions

An example of quality face-to-face interaction is when one is building trust in approaching the community:

“First of all we started to work in our own village. Then we started going to different villages and thus the entire area has become familiar to us. Likewise they trust us...This is how the confidence was built.”

Some women activists reported that they move door to door, sit with people in their own households, interact with them and provide a sympathetic ear. “By interaction, we understand them,” one participant reported. It seems that getting a message across to grassroots women requires showing by example, rather than dictation. “From the beginning,” one participant explained,

On the previous page: Young women on the radio with femTALK 89.2FM.

Photo from femLINKPACIFIC.



North East Network is a women's organisation working on rights issues in India's strife torn northeast. Ever since its inception, NEN's goal has been to empower women of the northeast around issues of peace, livelihood, and reproductive health. It works towards the fundamental change in the region's development perspectives from needs to rights.

“we teach them by action, not just by writing and reading, the way we teach our children. That's why we sun clothes.”

Another participant advises,

“First, know people in the village, only then, you enter.”

The rapport established helped some women villagers to entrust the organisations with information they would not normally share to other people. Thus, the trust built is integral to the success of these women's projects, and is connected to women's own empowerment as well.

PHILIPPINES

In March 2007, the National Network of Informal Workers (PATAMABA) gathered in a room at the University of the Philippines' College of Social Work and Community Development to share their notions of empowerment. For them, empowerment is primarily capacity-building.

Empowerment is Capacity-Building

PATAMABA women believe that empowerment lies in teaching women how to live in the world. They were



PATAMABA, founded in 1990, is a national network of informal workers in the Philippines who feel neglected, unrecognized and invisible in national statistics despite the contributions they give to our national economy. It was established primarily to ensure laws that would benefit workers in the informal sector are created and implemented.

proud to report how they have taught various home-based workers to be more productive, thus bringing pride and dignity into their humble work. They look at empowerment as a matter of transformation as well. Whereas before, the women would just sit around gossiping, gambling, and playing mahjong. Upon joining the group, they were able to learn useful skills such as how to sew, cook, make crafts and more importantly, speak up.

The FGD (focus group discussion) participants from PATAMABA also believe that empowerment lies in making women more confident and eloquent, often as a matter of necessity.

“You have to be tough and resourceful if you want them to understand your situation,”

they reasoned. With their participation in PATAMABA the women have become more outspoken and principle. According to Baby, one of the FGD participants and PATAMABA leaders:

“What we do is teach them how to face other people, so they themselves can ask for their needs. Some did not endure. But some did and they learned. So if you ask them, like Ka Huling...once she was standing in front, she was so nervous that she crumpled the paper. She was looking for her paper. She didn't know she had crumpled it. She couldn't speak.”

Baby added that being part of the group has changed them significantly:

“Before, we couldn't run after people...because we were embarrassed...the people with positions. Now somehow we know where we stand.”

For them, confidence is also a matter of facing more educated people. Empowerment lies in teaching their members to be more independent so that eventually, they will be the ones to actually talk to the organisations and agencies that could help them directly.

The group also believes that empowerment, aside from learning to be more outspoken, is also a matter of knowing how to expedite the communication process through tools:

“First is learning how to speak. Then to develop one's personality, and from there to learn to use different technologies. And then to pass this knowledge on to others. That's what you want to happen. If you consider, there are how many millions in the informal sector, how many millions of home-based workers...how do you organise them with the use of technology, without having to go to them often. If you can teach them, that they will learn...maybe not all of them but at least some leaders will. The exchange of information can be faster.”

Because of the eloquence of some PATAMABA members, moreover, they got to travel to other countries for conferences, earning the respect and admiration of their colleagues. Lastly, the group also believes that true empowerment lies in sustainability. It is in learning how to use the various technologies—videos, cellphones, computers and internet—for their maximum benefit, thus learning how to live comfortably in the “modern” world.

THAILAND

Based in Bangkok, the Foundation for Women (FFW) serves diverse groups of women from organisations across the country and believes that empowerment is recognising one's rights, transforming the community, and belonging to a group.

Empowerment is Recognising Women's Rights

The women of FFW believe that empowerment begins with recognising their rights. This is why the group puts up fora which familiarise women with laws that can protect their rights.



The Foundation for Women has been assisting women and girls who have survived violence. The organisation also helps women who have been deprived of opportunities such as education through their advocacy, campaigns and research work.

FFW also actively monitors the implementation of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other referential documents on the human rights of women and children in Thailand.

FFW makes its members consider the word “woman” in a broader meaning, considering how the term encompasses mother, wife, doctor, advocate, teacher, volunteer, social worker and many other identities.

As a large women's coalition concerned with different aspects and composed of different religions, ages, classes, positionalities and belief systems, FFW makes its members consider the word “woman” in a broader meaning, considering how the term encompasses mother, wife, doctor, advocate, teacher, volunteer, social worker and many other identities.

Empowerment is the Capacity to Transform the Community

For the participants, empowerment is also the capacity to help and transform the community, to open people's eyes and to push their limits, eventually making them understand the need for openness, diversity and solidarity. Thus, the Foundation also regularly trains their staff to be moderators, fortifying their legal knowledge and awareness of history and current affairs.

A participant from the Network of Andaman Women also relates how the Foundation helped her develop from an ignorant local villager to an educated, courageous and outspoken member of the Foundation who is ready to help and face any difficulty. Indeed, as one participant noted, developing its staff's potential is the strength of the Foundation. Therefore, they define empowerment as the confidence and assurance that grants them the power to help others.

Empowerment is Belonging to an Organised Group of Women

The members also feel empowered because of their membership in the network. In the Foundation, “*even the little knowledge they have makes a big difference.*” One participant explained how, working for FFW empowered her:

“Our group gets more acceptance from the community when we mention that we work with the Foundation.”

Despite the dangers that plague these women, they still continue their advocacies, with the FFW staff providing them moral support:

“This makes us feel stronger. We have the strong will to keep working because we know we don’t deal with our problems alone.”

They are also encouraged by the dedication of their leaders and their chairperson, who sometimes visits or accompanies the field officers to their areas of responsibility. One participant described the Foundation’s leaders through this remark:

“They do not just sit in the office and wait for reports.”

Aside from having people to emulate as role models, the Foundation is also a vital refuge when the women are plagued with verbal and nonverbal opposition in their family or community for being “improper,” “radical” or “anti-progress.” “Being accepted provides us deep moral support,” the women chorused.

The network has also proved invaluable for women who have been laid off from their jobs for protesting and standing up for their rights. It assures them that they have done nothing wrong and gives them an alternate support group to turn to, making them feel that

“although there is no one in our community who may understand us, there is always someone else in other parts of this country who do.”

The Foundation also recognises and accepts the women for the valuable work they accomplish:

“When faced with severe problems that we cannot solve by ourselves, it is good for us to always have someone to consult with.”

Their willpower comes from the awareness that whatever these problems may be, they have the capacity to cope. More often than not, through the network, their skill and awareness also becomes recognised and applauded in the community.

Through the network, the women’s good deeds are amplified, contextualised and given value, ensuring them of the



A 19 year-old woman from Shahbad, Daulatpur, a resettlement colony in North West Delhi in India is among the people behind a radio programme on disaster management, broadcast through the studio of One World South Asia. Photo by One World South Asia



The Catholic Women's League of Fiji is an organisation that contributes to the life and vitality of the church, family and community, both at home and abroad. Their work varies from supporting the Parish Priest to implementing the Bishop's initiatives, especially with regard to the family, from money raising for charities at home and abroad, to concerning themselves with political and social issues such as the plight of asylum seekers, ecumenism, bio-ethics and women's role in society.

worthiness of the causes that they are fighting for. Thus, according to its members, FFW's legacy *"will be a blueprint for the next generation to follow."*

FIJI

For the Fiji Island Catholic Women's League (CWL) camaraderie, intimacy, and enjoyment among women; exploring the world; and communicating your faith are the source of empowerment.

Love and Care

Empowerment for the group is having a sense of belonging and a sense of being welcomed by a group which is moving towards a similar path. While also working for a cause that they believe in, the group appreciates that CWL gives them a chance to show their affection for one another, a kind of maternal caring that extends even when a member's loved one dies. This is perhaps why the women are urged to join the chapters in their own locales, so one could feel better at home. For instance, one woman, who used to be a Methodist, was glad she had converted to Christianity after marrying her Christian husband, as she was able to join the group.

Empowerment is the Capacity to Go to Places

The group also feels that travelling with one's co-members reinforces the deep bonds they have with one another. Travelling also answers the group member's desire for adventure and knowledge, widening their vision and teaching them to uphold and appreciate diversity. Indeed, the promise of travelling has been one of the lures that encouraged women to join, especially in Fijian society where empowerment is viewed as literally *"the capacity to go places."*

As one participant narrated:

"We recently had a tour to Yasawa, while last year we went to Ba. I've really enjoyed it. I've learned a lot through my interaction with other women, because otherwise, I will just stay at home, like I have for most of my life. After joining the Catholic Women's League, I socialise more with other women from the different provinces. [I get to see] their behavior, their culture, their dialect, their food. And also the love, the love we share in the Catholic Women's League."

And as one woman said during the FGD in gratitude to the group, *"I've been to places I never would have even dreamt of going."*

Empowerment is Communicating Your Faith

The CWL also sees empowerment as being given the avenue to hone and

communicate one's faith, thereby fostering one's love of humanity. They see the rich exchange that they experience as an opportunity to not just exchange information, but also to pass on *"the Good News."* They have been empowered by CWL because through the league, they admitted:

"we've learned a lot, about our spiritual life, our life with each other. We share the good news when we talk with each other."

The women attribute this nurturance of peace, love and faith among each other to something higher than themselves, answering a call to be disciples and sisters in caring. As one woman said:

"The Lord encourages me to participate in this Catholic Women's League."

Thriving in the compassion and solidarity exemplified in CWL, the women discover a communion which is also a source of salvation from the mundane, loneliness and meaninglessness.

SUMMARY

As these women's stories convey, the grassroots women of India, the Philippines, Thailand, and Fiji expressed their different notions of empowerment from trust and personal interactions, self-transformation, capacity-building, recognising one's rights, belonging to a group, changing the community, promoting faith, peace and love, and seeing the world.

These ways of feeling empowered are not exclusive to grassroots women, but are shared by women, across class, national, and cultural borders. ■

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The next page is an illustration of the **PC4D** model as solar system where at its core are communities of practice surrounded by planets of policies and programmes. This is followed by a series of mindmaps demonstrating the key findings for the five Asia-Pacific countries: India, Philippines, Thailand, Fiji, and Papua New Guinea.