

Towards Rural Women's Empowerment and Poverty Reduction in Iran

Fatemeh Allahdadi

School of Humanities and Social Science, Science and Research Branch
Islamic Azad University, Tehran, Iran
faaref@yahoo.com

Abstract: This paper provides an approach for rural women's empowerment to poverty reduction in Iran. Although, rural women are certainly a major contributor to poverty reduction in many rural areas in developed countries. But the result of this study found that women's empowerment is limited by the same cultural restrictions that limit their access to education and health services, and these impose serious constraints on their autonomy, mobility, and on the types of livelihoods that are available to them. The finding can assist the local and national organizations for remove this problem in face of women's participation for poverty reduction in Iran.

[Fatemeh Allahdadi. **Towards Women's Empowerment and Poverty Reduction in Iran**. Life Science Journal. 2011;8(2):213-216] (ISSN:1097-8135). <http://www.lifesciencesite.com>.

Key words: Poverty reduction, women's empowerment, rural area

1. Introduction

The notion of empowerment, however, is not easy to define because of its extremely variable meaning that varies as influenced by social contexts, individual conditions and political circumstances (Quagliariello, 2009). Empowerment is a key for quality of life and human dignity, good governance, pro-poor growth, project effectiveness, and improved service delivery. Empowerment in terms of citizen inclusion and participation at the local level can help ensure that basic services reach poor people, and can lower operation and maintenance costs by comparison with centrally managed activities (World Bank, 2002).

The term 'empowerment' is a contested concept which connotes different meanings depending on different perspectives of looking at it (Asnarulkhadi & Aref, 2009). The empowerment of women means for them to have the necessary ability to undertake a number of tasks either individually or in groups, so that they have further access to and control of society resources. Empowerment is recognized as an essential strategy to strengthen the well-being of individuals, families and communities, government and non government agencies (Aref, 2010a). Empowerment has different meanings in different socio-cultural and political contexts, and does not translate easily into all languages. An exploration of local terms associated with empowerment around the world always leads to lively discussion. These terms include self-strength, control, self-power, self-reliance, own choice, life of dignity in accordance with one's values, capable of fighting for one's rights, independence, own decision making, being free, awakening, and capability—to

mention only a few. These definitions are embedded in local value and belief systems (World Bank, 2002).

Since the 1990's women have been identified as key agents of rural development and women's equality and empowerment are seen as central to a more holistic approach towards establishing new patterns and processes of development that are sustainable (Handy & Kassam, 2004a). However, in many societies around the world, women never belong wholly to themselves; they are the property of others throughout their lives. Their physical well-being – health, security and bodily integrity – is often beyond their own control. Where women have no control over money, they cannot choose to get health care for themselves or their children (Drinkwater, 2005).

In Iran there are some local organization for poverty reduction; but there are many challenges that face organizations who make it their goal to empower women (Narayan, 2002). Hence, this paper addresses the specific challenge that is faced by women's empowerment in rural area of Iran.

2. Literature Review

According to World Bank poverty is hunger. Poverty is lack of shelter. Poverty is being sick and not being able to see a doctor. Poverty is losing a child to illness brought about by unclean water. Poverty is powerlessness, lack of representation and freedom (Drinkwater, 2005). Whereas poverty is a multi-faceted phenomenon that hinders the satisfaction of basic life requirements, the tendency has been for some analysts to conceptualize it in narrow economic terms by insinuating that it is

simply the lack of money (Smith & Ross, 2006). Poverty has been defined as the “denial of opportunities and choices most basic to human development to lead a long, healthy, creative life and to enjoy a decent standard of living, freedom, dignity, self-esteem and respect from others” (Hirschowitz et al., 2000, p. 54).

Poverty can be reduced through women’s empowerment. Hence this study provides an approach for development of women’s empowerment for poverty reduction in Iran. Although the notion of women’s empowerment has long been legitimized by international development agencies, what actually comprises empowerment, and how it is measured, is debated in the development literature. Malhotra, Schuler and Boender, (2002) provide an excellent review of this debate. They review the many ways that empowerment can be measured and suggest that researchers pay attention to the process in which empowerment occurs. The frequently used gender empowerment measure is a composite measure of gender inequality in three key areas: Political participation and decision-making, economic participation and decision-making and power over economic resources (Handy & Kassam, 2004b).

There are thousands of examples of empowerment strategies that have been initiated by poor people themselves and by governments, civil society, and the private sector. Successful efforts to empower poor people, increasing their freedom of choice and action in different contexts, often share four elements:

- Access to information
- Inclusion and participation
- Accountability
- Local organizational capacity (World Bank, 2002).

In spite of these potential, there is a number of barriers for poverty reduction. For example lack of government programs and organizational capacity to respond to the opportunities provided (Jamieson & Nadkarni, 2009). Lack of formal education and skills and planning (Bushell & Eagles, 2007, p. 154). As a consequence, community facilities and services may be unacceptable for women. Hence building women’s empowerment in rural communities is necessary for stakeholders involved in rural development (Bushell & Eagles, 2007).

Implementing empowerment processes needs to allow women to play more effectively their peculiar role in areas such as, for instance, food security, education, health service, agricultural development policy and natural resources management is a prerequisite for sustainable

development. The essential actions leading to the strengthening of the role of women in rural areas respond to some basic priorities: access to resources, support to self-determination, awareness-raising, participation in the production and right to welfare policies (Quagliariello, 2009).

Women’s development priority actions in the rural areas:

1. Welfare
2. Access to Resources
3. Awareness-Raising
4. Participation
5. Self-Determination

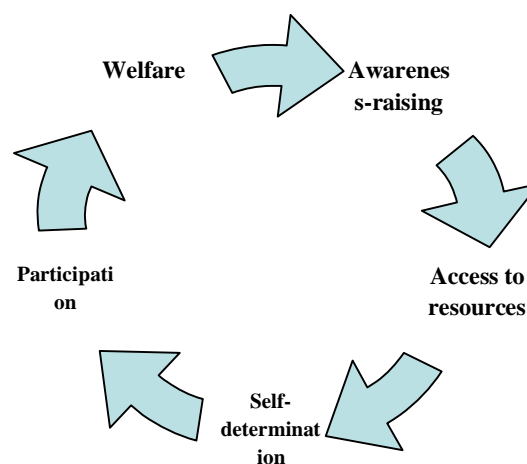


Figure 1. Women’s empowerment cycle adapted from Quagliariello (2009)

3. Methods

Marvdasht in Fars Province, Iran was selected as a case study area because it provided many opportunities to develop rural development; This study is based on quantitative methodology to investigate the barriers of women’s empowerment related to poverty alleviation. The participants in FGD were educated women that were engaged in education. Hence to achieve the objectives of this study, the researcher uses quantitative method. Focus group discussion (FGD) was performed to collect data from local residents. FGD conducted in a group setting and was used for obtaining a better understanding of participants’ attitudes (Aref, 2010b). There is no consensus among qualitative researchers on the optimal number of participants in FGD. But the ideal number of participants in each FGD is six to ten. The respondents were educated women that participated in 10 groups. They ranged in age from 22

- 45 years. The researcher explained to them the objectives of the study and what questions would be asked. The researchers examined, categorized participants responses from each focus group of villagers that were recorded in video tapes

3. Result

Information for this study was gathered from educated women through FGD. A qualitative analysis was undertaken to determine viewed the current level of women's empowerment in poverty reduction and also barriers of women's empowerment related to poverty reduction. There were overall 55 participants with an average of 33 years old. The FGDs held on in 10 educational centers in Marvdasht, Fars, Iran. All participants were teacher in school. They were chosen because of their knowledge. The questions were asked about to contribution of women in poverty reduction and barriers of women's empowerment for poverty reduction in rural area.

In terms of women's empowerment on poverty reduction, they believe that rural women does not have important role in their villages especially on poverty reduction. The findings showed that women in rural in their villages are without any certain planning for poverty reduction. Although the FGD respondent referred to variety barriers in terms of women's empowerment for poverty reduction in their villages, the study refer to some common barriers which have been discussed in majority of FGD groups. The most barriers in terms of rural women's empowerment for poverty reduction were including:

1) *Lack of suitable conditions*: The majority of FGD participants believed there are no suitable conditions in their village for women's participation in social and political participation and decision making.

2) *Lack of resources*: The lack of financial and community resources in the villages. The most participants mentioned to this issue as main obstacles to women's empowerment for poverty reduction.

3) *Lack of skill and knowledge*: The participants in all groups mentioned to this issue as one barrier for poverty reduction in their villages.

5) *Lack of suitable training*: FGD respondents believed the lack of training; especially was behind the failure investment for poverty reduction.

6) *Cultural restrictions in some families*: through FGD it found the family culture is the main barriers towards women empowerment towards education and occupation.

7) *Rural traditional values*: In some case women's empowerment can limited by some values.

Overall the result indicated that in most rural area women's empowerment is limited by the same

cultural restrictions that limit their access to education and health services, and these impose serious constraints on their autonomy, mobility, and on the types of livelihoods that are available to them. Their lack of access to education and resulting low-skill levels limits their opportunities for employment further.

4. Conclusion

This paper addresses the specific challenge that is faced by women's empowerment in rural communities in Marvdasht, Iran. This study has identified the barriers of women's empowerment for poverty reduction. Lack of capable organizations, lack of resources, and cultural restrictions were an important element contributing to limited rural women for poverty reduction. Overall the findings indicated that residents have negative attitude towards contribution of rural women for poverty reduction in their village. They referred to government policy and lack of local organizational capacity as main barriers related poverty reduction. Clearly, the described barriers may not be only specific to women's empowerment strategy; some of them may also be considered as common general problems of rural in other communities in Iran. Base on the findings for women's empowerment, any project should include, include the below items:

- The integration of procedures and principles aimed at enhancing and promoting the role of women as creators of development,

-The assessment of women as a major resource for the development of a country;

-The consideration of their state of health, educational level and nutritional status as significant indicators of the degree of development of a country;

- The enhancement of the image of women as guardians of the traditional know-how so as to favor and promote their involvement in rural economic activities, and management processes.

References

- Aref, F. (2010a). Community capacity as an approach for sustainable tourism. *e-Review of Tourism Research*, 8(2), 30-40.
- Aref, F. (2010b). Residents' attitudes towards tourism impacts: A case study of Shiraz, Iran. *Tourism Analysis*, 15(2), 253-261.
- Asnarulkhadi, A. S., & Aref, F. (2009). People's Participation in Community Development: A Case Study in a Planned Village Settlement

- in Malaysia. *World Rural Observations*, 1(2), 45-54.
- Bushell, R., & Eagles, P. (Eds.). (2007). *Tourism and Protected Areas: Benefits Beyond Boundaries*. London CAB International, UK.
- Drinkwater, M. (2005). 'We are also Human: Identity and Power in Gender Relations.
- Grover, R., & Vriens, M. (2006). *The handbook of marketing research: Uses, misuses, and future advances*: Sage Publications.
- Handy, F., & Kassam, M. (2004a). *Women's empowerment in rural India*. Paper presented at the ISTR conference, Toronto Canada.
- Handy, F., & Kassam, M. (2004b). *Women's empowerment in rural India*. Paper presented at the Paper presented as the ISTR conference, Toronto Canada July, 2004.
- Hirschowitz, R., Orkin, M., & Alberts, P. (2000). *Key baseline statistics for poverty measurement*. Statistics South Africa: Pretoria.
- Jamieson, W., & Nadkarni, S. (2009). Editorial: A reality check of tourism's potential as a development tool. *Asia Pacific Journal of Tourism Research*, 14(2), 111-123.
- Malhotra, A., Sidney, S., & Carol, B. (2002). Measuring Women's Empowerment as a Variable in International Development, *Paper commissioned by the Gender and Development Group of the World Bank*.
- Mendis-Millard, S., & Reed, M. G. (2007). Understanding Community Capacity Using Adaptive and Reflexive Research Practices: Lessons From Two Canadian Biosphere Reserves. *Society & Natural Resources An International Journal* 20(6), 543-559.
- Narayan, D. (Ed.). (2002). *Empowerment and poverty reduction: A sourcebook*. Washington: World Bank.
- Quagliariello, R. (2009). The importance of gender empowerment in rural development program GEWAMED and TERCOM Projects. *Mediterranean Agronomic Institute of Bari - IAMB*.
- Smith, S., & Ross, C. (2006). *How the SYNDICOOP Approach has Worked in East Africa*, . Geneva: ILO, ICA and ICFTU.
- World Bank. (2002). *Empowerment and poverty reduction: A sourcebook*.

04/02/2011