

The Role of Collective Motivation and Empathy in Self Help Groups

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ABSTRACT

In the Kesla block of Hoshangabad district of Madhya Pradesh in India, we find a cohesive group of rural women accessing their true leadership potential and fostering social change within their communities. An informal group of women sharing similar socio-economic backgrounds, belonging to the same village form a collective called the Self-help groups (SHG's). In the village of Abadipur and Silwani, women are influencing and participating in societal processes and transcending the limitations imposed by a lack of education, power, and financial assistance through leadership development.

Through a socio-anthropological lens, the paper attempts to study and analyse women leadership in under-developed rural settings and emphasise the role of collective motivation and empathy in transforming lives. The methodology used for the research study is threefold- By conducting primary research to collect and collate qualitative data in central India in the region of Madhya Pradesh, using the method of participant observation. Further, by delving into secondary resources from the field of development studies, sociology, and anthropology, the research findings are substantiated. Lastly, the paper will provide powerful anecdotal evidence to explore how rural women have acquired leadership qualities being part of SHG's and the integration of self with the other has facilitated a marked change.

INTRODUCTION

Women in rural India have particularly limited access to education, employment, healthcare, and finance. The patriarchal social fabric of India's rural life further restricts a woman's opportunity for personal growth and self-development. The National Mission for Empowerment for Women and the Ministry of Women and Child Development has launched a series of socio-economic development initiatives and programmes that have witnessed a positive change in the past. Rural women are still often the most marginalised and deprived section of our society. At the backdrop of this, the stable economic growth and focused women empowerment schemes by the government is slowly unfolding and accelerating change in rural communities.

Microfinance credit programmes specifically like Self-help groups have proven to be fruitful and favourable for the rural women. In the Kesla block of Hoshangabad district of Madhya Pradesh in Central India, women are transforming their lives and being the active agents of change. Self-help groups (SHG's) are an informal group of women belonging to the same village or nearby villages and sharing a similar socio-economic background. These women make periodic savings into the collective and then the money can be loaned within the group. They sometimes extend

their financial requirements to a bank but usually try to be a self-sustaining group. International NGOs, local NGOs, cooperatives, banks and Self-help group promoting institutes have recognised SHG's as a catalyst for empowerment within welfare economics. By engaging in independent livelihood activities, SHG's are also instilling self-worth and ensuring rural women are becoming financially independent.

Interestingly, women belonging to the collective purposefully address their personal, financial and infrastructural problems that aid the development of their village. This has increased greater participation in the societal processes and created awareness about economic, social and political actions. SHG's can anchor not just financial but also emotional and psychological support.

This research paper aims to analyse carefully how rural women are enabling social transformation as a part of SHG's and how leadership development is at the centre of this change. The success of SHG's is often attributed to external enablers like NGOs and Cooperatives that have promoted and assisted these groups in forming. However, the paper focuses on the ability of the rural women who have acquired leadership qualities and the interplay of collective motivation and empathy in SHG's.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Within the feminist literature, Mary Wollstonecraft in 'A Vindication of the Rights of Woman' (1797) outlined the rights aimed at the free agency of women. "I do not wish them [women] to have power over men, but over themselves."¹ She traced the nuances of women's ability to acquire strength and those specific traits that will lead them to their personal development back in 1792. Her understanding of the importance of women to focus on self-enrichment stated centuries ago finds its relevance in contemporary India today in 2016.

"Consequently, the most perfect education, in my opinion, is such an exercise of the understanding as is best calculated to strengthen the body and form the heart; or, in other words, to enable the individual to attain such habits of virtue as will render it independent. In fact, it is a farce to call any being virtuous whose virtues do not result from the exercise of its own reason."²

Drawing from Wollstonecraft, the Self-help groups have created a safe space for women to challenge the societal norms and contribute to the village development in a unique way. They can exercise reason, dissect issues and find solutions faced by them on an individual and collective level. The low female literacy rate in Madhya Pradesh and lack of access to proper education is

not holding these women back from contributing effectively towards the development of their homes and community. The presence of strong-willed local leaders and PRADAN's committed staff is working together towards capacity building in Kesla. A significant assertion by Noble Laureate Amartya Sen in his writing 'Development as Freedom' called "Women are active agents of change and dynamic promoters of social transformation."³

ETHNOGRAPHIC RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Through a socio-anthropological lens, the paper attempts to study and analyse women leadership in under-developed rural settings and emphasise the role of collective motivation and empathy in transforming lives. The research methodology adopted was ethnographic in nature and primary research conducted in the villages of Abadipura and Silwani in Hoshangabad, Madhya Pradesh. The research findings are substantiated by delving into secondary resources in the field of development studies, organizational behaviour, anthropology, and feminist studies. Broadly, the research framework lies at the intersection of social anthropology and leadership development.

The research questions examine the role of collective motivation and empathy, as invaluable tools of rural leadership, in facilitating individual and community development.



Figure 1 Research methodology used

"Participant observation is the process enabling researchers to learn about the activities of the people under study in the natural setting through observing and participating in those activities. It provides the context for development of sampling guidelines and interview guides".⁴

Through participant observation and informal interviews with the village women and PRADAN staff, the paper illustrates two women empowerment evidence. Lastly, the paper will provide powerful anecdotal evidence to explore how rural women have acquired leadership

qualities being part of SHG's and the integration of self with the other has facilitated a marked change.

SELF HELP GROUP MEETINGS

About the village

Abadipura is a small village in Madhya Pradesh, falls under the Kesla district. The village comprises of 35 joint and nuclear households, and the primary source of income is Poultry and Agriculture. There is one primary school in the village until grade 5.

Every month, the women of these neighbouring villages (Silwani and Abadipura) come together and discuss their agenda. Women leaving their respective homes and walking a distance only to attend SHG cluster meeting speaks volumes about how the transition in rural India is slowly unfolding. In ancient India, several social practices have decided a woman's moral obligation to society. Her purpose of existence was defined by matters concerning childcare, motherhood and running the household. SHG meetings have now ensured that women are more mobile, independent and regularly leaving their 'homes' to engage on issues outside the periphery of domestic chores. The impact of this participation/engagement reflects directly on their levels of self-worth and the seamless transition from diffidence to confidence. Their ability to generate income through poultry, agriculture, cultivation and other livelihood activities has resulted in financial independence and thus, creating hope for a dignified living.

These women are exercising reason and meaningfully participating in conversations around government, politics, education, traditions and finance. The true essence of women's empowerment lies in her increased decision-making powers within households and recognition of her perspectives and opinions. By overcoming family pressure and decades of social conditioning, SHG meetings allow women the possibility of exploring who they are and how purposefully they wish to engage with the village at large.

Interestingly, the format of the meeting is an open house session where all members sit on the floor facing each other. Each member makes regular savings and the savings are shared as a collective in times of need. There is complete democratic participation; the moderator makes sure that everyone is heard without any pre-conceived notions and judgments. All meetings are transcribed and sometimes even audio recorded. There is a proper book of accounts that is maintained, which details the credit and debit of each month. The agenda and the minutes of the

meeting are meticulously written. The village keeps a box system, where the money is collected and saved. Deliberately, the keys and the box are always kept in different houses within the village women to ensure transparency in transactions.

PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION

Through powerful anecdotes, the paper documents many narratives that traverse through leadership styles of three women. There are innumerable stories and accounts of women who have not only tread the path of self-transformation but also are becoming rural entrepreneurs. The peer influence of the collective propels an intangible change that begins with women taking charge of their personal growth. Feminist philosopher Mayoux affirms that “Women empowerment needs to be strategically aligned to gender interests and need to go beyond economic advancement.”⁵

Case Study 1: Shakuni Bai, Member, SHG

Shakuni Bai, a member of the SHG, belongs to the Adivasi community and traditionally, the tribe has struggled in the social hierarchies of India and economically been severely discriminated against. The dynamics of Shakuni’s household have always been patriarchal; the husband commanded and headed the family. Initially, when she joined the SHG, she faced immense resistance from her in-laws and her husband, particularly to devote her time to the collective. She was, however, determined to get her family out of poverty and took a loan from the group to channel the finances towards farming and poultry. Within a few months, with the help of PRADAN, she started two poultry and now has over 750 hens. Her annual income is Rs.7000 – Rs.8000 and her contribution to the household reversed the power structures of the family. Her husband now cooks and takes care of poultry while she participates in SHGs. This certainly exemplifies the direct correlation of financial independence with respect and dignity. Shakuni Bai’s new stature allows her to express her opinions about family planning, her children’s education, and poultry expansion plans.

Case Study 2: Sukhiya Bai, Leader, SHG

Sukhiya Bai, a woman in her late 50s truly epitomizes a leader who has impacted many lives through her journey of personal development. She is the moderator of the SHG of the Abadipura cluster and leads all the meetings. Her life purpose is to make the village prosper and solve every problem with empathetic concern. Sukhiya Bai can be described as powerful, commanding and highly respected in the community. One of her most impressive qualities was the ability to convene

meetings and take a stand on matters regarding the SHG. She also got her opinions across in a way that did not hurt the sentiments of the other women in the group.

In the meeting, she guides the discussion and requests each member to address their issues one by one. The whole group brainstorms on arriving at a solution with everyone's consent. Sukhiya Bai as a moderator, ensures that after the group has come to a resolution, they all pause for a few seconds and applaud for reaching the desired outcome. The motivational cues such as clapping, pausing to appreciate if a member displayed courage and encouraging every single individual to speak bind the collective together. She is an excellent facilitator and has exemplary listening skills. She inspires the women around her and pushes them to fight for a better quality of living. Sukhiya Bai's conflict resolution style is collaborative, and one instance through the meeting demonstrated.

One of the village women was sceptical about the local panchayat and blamed the government for not focusing their attention on Abadipura. Sukhiya bai's response to it was

“The government will not always help you, but we will all have to go to the next level of required to work for the betterment of our village. We will all strive for bringing prosperity in all our lives. The onus lies on us, and we will help each other through”.

Sukhiya Bai uses inspirational appeals as an influence tactic and increases the confidence in the members to achieve tasks. Her conflict resolution style is collaborative, and she is always striving to involve each member and attempt to dissolve conflicts with mutual consents. Valley and Long-Lingo (2001) argued that power is situational, with each situation having “radically different implications for the actions you can take.”⁶

If we apply the situational application of power to Abadipura SHG meeting, both Sukhiya Bai and the young Sushila strive together for positive outcomes and productive implications for the collective.

Case Study 3: Sushila, Accounts, SHG

Sushila, a 20-year-old dynamic young woman, maintains the accounts and bookkeeping. She is a 9th-grade dropout, however, has received formal training from PRADAN. The commitment and compassion towards the development of her village is her mission in life. When probed about her personal ambitions, she emphasised that traditional marriage is not in her line of vision. She wants to educate herself and make a real difference in her community. With the help of PRADAN, she

taught herself technology and accounting. She acts as the right hand to Suhkiya Bai.

Sushila is a conversational leader; through her effective persuasion and communication skills, she addresses the group. By establishing intimacy and continuous interactions, she ensures that all the women in the village are following the tasks as divided and completing them.⁷ Harvard School Professor Groysberg illustrates the quality of using continuous communication to align personal and organizational goals. Sushila follow-up with every village woman, going door-to-door to check on the SHG members and remind them about tasks and timelines. The impact of her motivational reminders accelerates the group's performance. In one instance, she visited the village women to remind them about the upcoming SHG meeting and to make certain they are saving regularly. Sushila's uses the coalition tactic and seeks to build a bridge across individuals and the SHG to support a proposal or to fulfil the requirements of a delegated task. Her conflict resolution style is accommodating, and her first instinct is to arrive at a consensus that everyone agrees with.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Women Transforming Rural India

SHGs have been proved one of the most successful innovations in the field of micro-credit and truly so become a social movement.

Consciousness raising saw the first waves of feminism. An informal group of women got together to share their experiences, tragedies, stories in the search for empathy, help and social action in the 1960s in America.⁸ This laid a solid foundation for the revolution it created, and it is fascinating how a few women with an intention to share the challenges found a support group that soon changed the way the world looked at women issues.

These women in rural Madhya Pradesh are no different; they are a cohesive group that are accessing their true leadership potential and fostering social change within their communities. Through collective motivation and empathy, they can create an atmosphere of mutual trust. Each member sheds their inhibitions and copes with social problems together. The act of sharing and the acknowledgment of getting heard, provide members with inexplicable solidarity. Thus, the interdependence of informal networks such as SHG and collective motivation; is helping build leadership capacities within each member. The power of informal networks helps in creating awareness about women's rights and provides the support mechanism for them to grow. The SHG

help gives extrinsic motivation to its members and then the feeling of independence gives them the intrinsic motivation to participate continuously.

Further, an interesting dimension of the SHG leadership is that it is a self-governed group of individuals, and the responsibility of its proper functioning lies not only on the leader but every member. The collective ownership and joint responsibility empower the team. The peer support encourages the members to embrace their selfhood and oppose any form of domestic exploitation.

The SHG group started a new daughter-in-law subgroup to establish a new kind of bonding between the peer groups. Young daughters-in-law in India have a stereotypically tense relationship with their mothers-in-law. However, this cluster is consciously working towards bridging the gap between the women in the household and outside it.

The SHG cooperative is working towards changing their perspective towards community building and moving towards developing deeper interpersonal relationships within women. Strong bonds and trust within the group give them the courage to ask for equality within their households.

One of the women spoke of the importance of financial independence for each individual, regardless of gender. She inspired confidence and seemed optimistic about the village's progress. Women confessing that they have become a lot more confident since they started working with PRADAN and attending such meetings.

PERCEPTION SURVEY

To further elucidate the impact of SHG's on women leadership, a perception survey was conducted on those participants who were observers in the SHG meeting in Kesla. These observers were young urban women from ages 21 to 26 and were visiting students. The observers were exposed to this environment for the first time and this survey attempts to provide a complementary perspective to the analysis presented previously. The observers and the SHG participants both were all-women; however, belonged to different realities. The aim of the perception survey is also to reduce the subjective bias in the research study and locate the empirical findings.

The interaction of the students who were the outsiders in the village setting and the SHG women being the local participants presented a fascinating experiment of thought.

The perception survey was designed to collect qualitative and quantitative assessment of the observer's experiences. The questionnaire had ten (10) items in total, out of which four (4)

items answered were purely experiential, two (2) items were contextual and the remaining four (4) items answered on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from “Strongly agree” to “Strongly disagree.” The measure has three (3) subscales, which derive from the Interpersonal Reactivity Index, Davis.⁹ The IRI is a tool to measure empathy and the subscales studied Perspective Taking, Empathetic concern and Personal distress.

ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

The questions were intended to document the experiences and powerful observations of the respondents of the SHG collective. Further, by collating and identifying relevant variables and patterns, the results of the survey are detailed.

The respondents described the core feeling of SHG meetings as a “life changing experience, an eye opener, informative and heartwarming.” They were surprised by the peer influence and active role the Self-help group has on enriching the lives of the women.

Experience of SHG meeting

- Core Feeling: Life changing and an eye opener
- Context: Level of confidence and awareness
- Relatedness: Insightful and enriching
- Social Interactions: Conflict management

The levels of confidence and awareness of SHG women displayed how successfully maintained their accounts, passbook with the bank. They also knew about the nuances of writing a proposal to the bank and following up with the branch manager. The respondents were in complete resonance with how insightful and informative experience it was witnessing a group of rural women adding value to the society and making a difference at the grassroots. The respondents pointed out the ability of these women to arrive at a consensus and resolve differences and disputes seamlessly.

Perception of Sukhiya Bai

The next section of the questionnaire focused on the observer’s understanding of Sukhiya Bai and how they perceived her. They described her primary qualities based on the SHG meeting as a motivator, a natural leader, courageous and passionate. As a leader, she was bold, determined, an implementer, innovative, fair and a strong decision maker. Her zeal to make a difference and her forward thinking mindset and positive outlook, (which was certainly contagious and strengthened the spirit of the meeting), affirmed her as a visionary. She was also a law-enforcer and ensured the

group was following the norms and the rules. Courageous, passionate, commanding and radical were also a few adjectives that described her. As an elderly head in the village, she took the responsibility of empowering women around her and pushed them to fight and work to have better lives. Her mission and vision for the SHG cooperative were aligned with her values.

Qualities of Sukhiya Bai

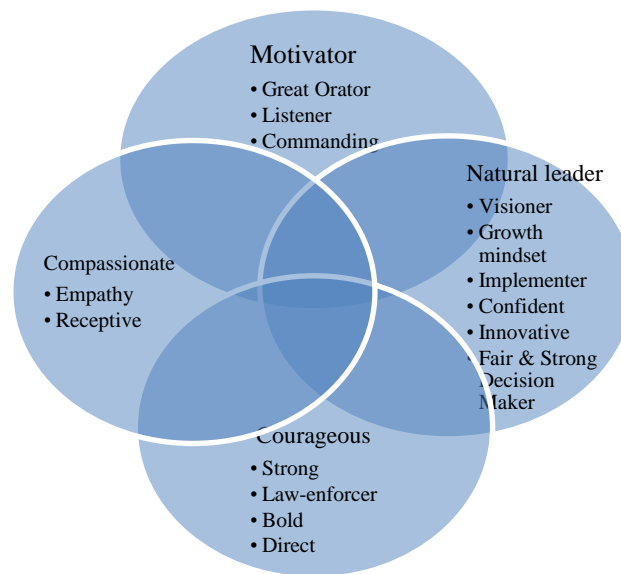


Figure 2 Qualities of Sukhiya Bai

The above illustration is a Venn diagram of Sukhiya Bai's innumerable qualities, characteristics, and roles she played as SHG moderator. The chart shows that she is at the intersection of many qualities, all affirming the type of leader she is and how many leadership qualities she has been able to access.

Sukhiya Bai is symbolic of leadership being innate in rural India regardless of education, literacy, socio-economic backgrounds, and class. Further, leadership is learnt and honed as one navigates the path to self-development. The all-women environment and the peer group support makes it conducive to learn and unfold the leadership potential within, as evidenced in the case of SHG's.

Empathic Concern, Perceptive Taking and Personal Distress within SHG

The next section of the survey explores the scale of empathy, trust, peer-motivation, self-confidence in women.

Table 1 Statistical Analysis of Indices

	Mean	Standard Deviation
Empathetic Concern	4.00	0.74
Perspective Taking	3.50	0.90
Personal distress	4.08	0.51
Mutual Trust	4.17	0.58

The above table shows the respondents were measured on Empathetic Concern, Perspective Taking, Personal distress, and Mutual Trust. The results clearly indicate that the respondents felt the SHG group was empathetic to each other's issues and concerns with the results showing a mean of 4 and a low standard deviation (SD) of 0.74. Empathy, as defined by Davis, is the "reactions of one individual to the observed experiences of another (Davis, 1983)."¹⁰ On perspective taking, the responses revealed that the SHG was sensitive to the psychological viewpoint of other members on some occasions with a mean of 3.5 and a standard deviation of 0.90. The SHG group was very responsive to personal distress faced by other members, as can be determined from a high mean of 4.08 and a relatively very low standard deviation of 0.51. The group was rated very highly on mutual trust within the group, with a high mean of 4.18 and a low standard deviation of 0.58.

Using the Interpersonal Reactivity Index, the SHG group displays high on empathy and the variable of mutual trust within the group. All respondents affirmed that peer motivation played a significant role in the SHG groups functioning. They also established a 100% correlation between the financial independence of women and the increasing respect within the households. They all believed that the livelihood activities of SHG, like poultry farming, are helping women instill self-confidence in themselves.

WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT EVIDENCE

One of the most prominent changes in the village that is visible is the increasing respect for women. During an SHG meeting, men never intervene or disturb the course of the session. Joint families in the village are accepting women going to work and attending such meetings. Men sometimes extend help in household chores and offer to cook, take care of poultry in the absence of a woman.

SHG drives on collective strength; each member stands up for each other. Sukhiya Bai backed up women and told her to pursue her fight for her rights and appeal to the Panchayat, local

governing body. She said the whole collective would support her for the cause.

Another emerging trend in the village is the progressive outlook of the villagers and accepting women as they are. One of the village women wanted her daughter in law to go out, teach students and make use of her education.

There is growing receptiveness towards women working for the village and being mobile. Women are now admitting that they are not afraid or scared to talk to strangers or to roam around in the vicinity freely.

SELF HELP MECHANISMS

The paper has identified the following self-help mechanisms can become invaluable tools of rural leadership and help anchor individual and community development as evidenced above.

- Understanding and support in the peer-group
- Intrinsic and extrinsic motivation
- Empathetic Concern

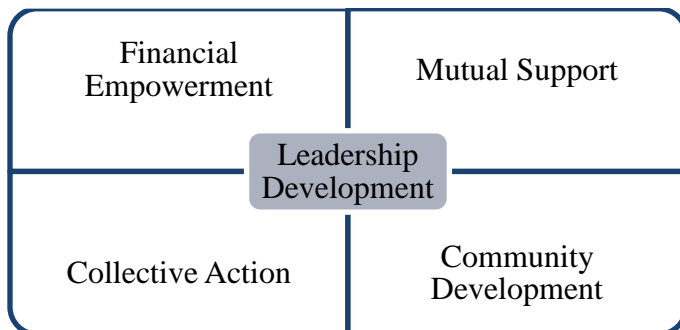


Figure 3 Four dimensions of collective impact on leadership development

The above chart explains the nuanced relationship of leadership development with its four dimensions of collective impact: Financial empowerment, mutual support, collective action and community development.

Each variable facilitates leadership development and leadership development is central to each variable's implementation. The women's collective enables community development, and it is through the personal growth of 50% population that constitute women that the community truly benefits. It is through the vehicle of mutual support that they are successful as SHG's, and it feeds into the development of each member of the group. The SHG revolution has resulted in driving a social action that is collectively made possible. This action leads to group development percolating at the individual level as well. Self-reliance and financial independence directly affect the

leadership of the women and simultaneously accelerates the process of its evolution. The process of leadership development creates agents of change and empowered individuals such as Sukhiya Bai, Sushila and the members of the SHG group.

ACCESSING LEADERSHIP POTENTIAL

The case study of these rural women annotates that the possibility of transcending social challenges and conditioning can be realised by accessing their inner strength and potential. SHG has made women enterprising, entrepreneurial and aspiring. They are uplifting their living conditions, financial stature, and personal skills. The collective is evolving together with the help of NGOs and managing their pooled resources efficiently.

According to D'souza,

“the SHG are basically small informal groups, characterised by voluntary memberships, a democratic and consultative structure of governance, economic participation of members, autonomy, education and training and concerns for the poor.”¹¹

The formation of SHGs is disrupting the traditional ecosystem of the village and providing equal opportunities for growth. All members evolve and experience this internal wave of transformation through peer support and empathetic understanding. Social leaders are born through this micro-credit programme, and they are truly initiating change in rural India.

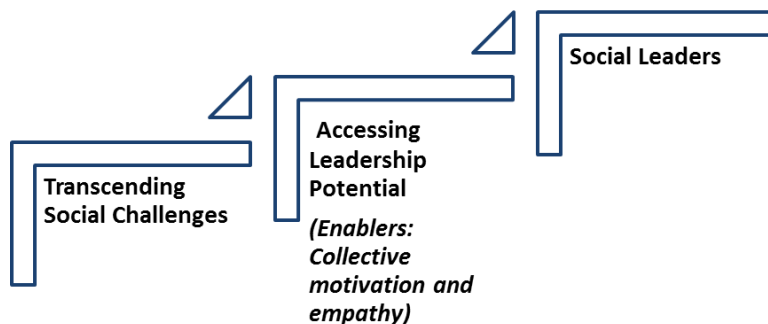


Figure 4 Accessing Leadership Potential

CONCLUSION

Ursula K. Le Guin “*There have been great societies that did not use the wheel but there have been no societies that did not tell stories.*” The story of Abadipura and the case studies of powerful women leaders serve as exemplary highlights to a positive economic and social impact. In a small village in India, leadership is studied as a nurturing phenomenon, one that enables each one to

discover their potential with empathy and motivation. The organisational behaviour lens of the research introduces various frameworks that display the process of developing leadership strengths. The anecdotal evidence of the rural women analysed using the management studies lens offers a peek into a new era of leaders who emerge at the backdrop of severe socio-economic challenges. These local women leaders are accessing their true self and are on the path to innovate, transform and build personal capabilities. Through self-help mechanisms and self-development, women are reorienting the model of community development.

Women can transcend the external limitations imposed by society by creating a network of support system that thrives and drives collective action.

Thus, women have nurtured, acquired, developed and unravelled the leadership potential within the SHG model of micro-credit programmes.

ENDNOTES

¹ Mary Wollstonecraft , “A Vindication of the Rights of Woman” (1792), Chapter 4

² Mary Wollstonecraft , “A Vindication of the Rights of Woman” (1792), Chapter 2, Page number 31

³ Amartya Sen, “Development as Freedom, Chapter 8, page number 189

⁴ DeWalt KM, DeWalt BR, Wayland CB. Participant observation. In Bernard HR (ed.). Handbook of Methods in Cultural Anthropology. Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 1998.

⁵ Mayoux L., 1997: The Magic Ingredient? Microfinance and Women’s Empowerment, A Briefing Paper prepared for the Micro Credit Summit, Washington.

⁶ Valley, K. L., & Long-Lingo, E. (2001, March 21). Power and influence: Achieving your objectives in organizations (Harvard Business School Note 801-425). Cambridge, MA: Harvard Business School Press

⁷ Boris Groysberg, Michael Slind, “Talk, Inc.: How Trusted Leaders Use Conversation to Power Their Organizations”,Page 6

⁸ Willis, Ellen, "Radical Feminism and Feminist Radicalism", 1984, collected in No More Nice Girls: Countercultural Essays, Wesleyan University Press, 1992

⁹ Davis, M. H. (1980). A multidimensional approach to individual differences in empathy. JSAS Catalog of Selected Documents in Psychology, 10, 85.

¹⁰ Davis, M. H. (1980). A multidimensional approach to individual differences in empathy. JSAS Catalog of Selected Documents in Psychology, 10, 85.

¹¹ D’souza, W, “Microcredit programme monitoring system: A review of MVRADA experience,” Search Bulletin, 14, No. 13, March 1999, p.7

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