

KFAW Report

Reports on KFAW Research Activities at the 22nd Kitakyushu Conference on Asian Women

The Kitakyushu Forum on Asian Women (KFAW) holds the Kitakyushu Conference on Asian Women every fall. The 22nd Conference was organized under the theme “Facing Natural Disasters: What We Should Learn from the Great East Japan Earthquake” on November 26th and 27th, 2011. On the second day, KFAW researchers reported on the results of their research and exchanged opinions with participants as below.

1. Comparative Research on Effective Policies and Measures to Raise the Total Fertility Rates in Japan and Korea: An Interim Report by Masami Shinozaki^{*}

2. Women's Empowerment through Collective Actions: The Case of Makthal Federation in Andhra Pradesh, India by Masako Ota^{}**

<Abstract>

Empowerment, together with gender mainstreaming, has become a key word in gender and development, following the fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995. By adopting various approaches, efforts have been made to empower women globally.

In empowering people, five aspects are considered, namely physical, psychological, social, economic and political aspects. Physical, social and economic aspects of empowerment are often used as an entry point, and in the process, psychological empowerment takes place. Political empowerment is the final goal.

Presently, the most popular approach is the empowerment of women economically, replicating the success of the Grameen Bank project. It is reported that the status of women improves with gains in their economic power; simultaneously, women also gain confidence and advance psychologically. On the other hand, progress is slow in literacy education which is a major project for social empowerment, and very few projects are conducted specifically to increase political participation.

The Mahila Samakhya Programme is conducted by the Government of India and aims to empower women through education. The programme provides not only literacy

* KFAW Chief Researcher

** KFAW Senior Researcher

education but also training to develop capability to solve problems surrounding women and girls. By removing obstacles to promote female education, women and girls are enabled to avail themselves of educational opportunities. Equipping women with political power is included as one of the programme components.

The Mahila Samakhya Programme has unique characteristics. It neither contains specific components to be followed, nor sets quantitative targets with deadlines. It adopts a participatory and bottom-up approach, and decentralised decision-making. Education is defined in broad terms, including literacy skills, life skills and analytical skills, but delivery of educational services is not the main activity. Importantly, the programme has a clear exit strategy. In order to achieve the overall goal of the programme—gender equality in society, it attaches importance to self-reliance and participation in society, in particular political participation.

One of the programme states, Andhra Pradesh, has been chosen as a case for this study, since it is one of the states where the programme was initiated during its infancy stage and remarkable progress has been observed over time. The implementing body, the Andhra Pradesh Mahila Samatha Society (APMSS), has expanded the programme area from two to fourteen districts between 1993 and 2010. Today, 171,646 women have organised themselves into 4,812 groups. These women's groups at the village level are being formed into larger groups as clusters and then as federations. Twenty-eight such federations conduct activities independently of the programme.

Of these, this report focuses on Swatantra Bharata Mahila Sangham in Makthal mandal which is one of the first two federations created in Andhra Pradesh. It has long experience with achievements in solving problems that women face, promoting education, and redressing gender discrimination. The federation in Makthal is considered a role model for other federations and attracts visitors wishing to learn from their experiences. In order to explore the development process from a women's group to a federation and the empowerment process of women as individuals and as groups, fieldwork was conducted in Makthal between 5th and 10th of January in 2011.

APMSS chose Makthal mandal as a programme area and started visiting villages in 1994. Women of low castes were gradually being gathered and organising themselves into women's groups. While the APMSS provided various trainings to increase members' capacities to empower themselves, envisioning its withdrawal from the programme areas, the idea of creating a federation of women's groups emerged from the women members. Women's groups in Makthal mandal reasoned that becoming a federation was effective for solving common problems across the villages by joining hands with women's groups in neighbouring villages.

Issues taken up included child marriage, the *jogini* system and child labour. These were obstacles which stood in the way of school enrolment for children, in particular girls, but it was difficult for individual women's groups to take action. Through concerted efforts, such as campaigns, demonstrations and negotiations, they have

effectively eliminated child labour and successfully prevented child marriage and girls from becoming *joginis*. Makthal federation gained confidence through these activities and subsequently initiated other activities. It has developed as an organisation independent of the original programme, overseeing group activities in Makthal mandal and conducting its own projects.

Another important point of progress made in Andhra Pradesh is member women's participation in local governance. The APMSS considers that women's political participation is fundamental to elicit changes in society. It motivates member women to vote and run for elections, and provides training to those who are elected. The number of elected representatives increased from 63 to 1,874 between 1995 and 2010.

Group discussions with the members of Makthal federation found that they have been empowered physically, psychologically, socially, economically and politically. They sometimes faced opposition and harassment from villagers, but they have stayed united and continued working with strong commitment to the cause for women. As a result, some positive changes have emerged towards the achievement of gender-equal society.

There are, however, challenges for the APMSS and Makthal federation. Although the Mahila Samakhya Programme is an education programme, the progress in reducing illiteracy is slow. Since education is an important component of social empowerment and serves as the basis for economic and political empowerment, the APMSS needs to redouble its efforts. Makthal federation needs to strengthen itself in order to ensure that its actions are sustainable in the long-term. Towards this end, it is important to maintain the members' motivation and secure financial and human resources.

This report thus intends to present an approach to women's empowerment that does not focus on economic empowerment, yet is successful in improving women's status. It is hoped that this paper can provide some insights on planning projects for women's empowerment.