

Impact of Self Help Group Membership of Rural Women on their Political Participation and Community Service

Nalla Vivekanand¹, Dr. A. Velayudham²

¹VTDCMPU Ltd (AAVIN), Vellore Tamil Nadu

²Professor and Head, Dean-School of Social Sciences, Department of Psychology, Bharathiar University, Coimbatore
Tamil Nadu

*Corresponding Author Email: nallajersey@gmail.com, avelayudham@rediffmail.com

Abstract: The present study examined the impact of Self-Help Group (SHG) membership of rural women in their political participation and community service. The objective of the study was to compare the women's political participation and community service between the self-help group members and non-self-help group members. Data was collected from the 70 SHG members and 70 non-SHG members. Two groups were compared on the measure of empowerment using Chi-square with Yates' continuity correction since the variable was categorical and dichotomous. The result showed that the rural women participants of SHG showed high community service attitude than the non-participants. However, there was no difference found between the two groups in the political participation.

Keywords: Self-Help Group, Rural Women, Community Service, and Political Participation.

1. INTRODUCTION

In the present days, the empowerment of women has been a burning issue and has been discussed and debated by policy makers, sociologists, socioeconomic reformists, feminists, and philanthropists. In the Indian context, disadvantaged groups should be brought into the economic development stream, which can be performed through woman empowerment, to harvest the payback of financial development, and in particular, women are empowered to get their equitable position in the socioeconomic structure of the Nation (World Bank, 2014). Women play a significant role in the economic and social growth of society but are frequently deprived of the same opportunities because of socially entrenched gender inequalities.

Since 72 years of Indian independence, rural women are one of the most powerless and marginalized sections of Indian society. India is still facing two major problems: one is the rural-urban divide and the second is a rich-poor divide and 68.84 % of the Indians live in the villages. According to the 2011 survey, there are 6,40,867 villages in India, and the population of rural women who are literate is 58.8 %. According to UNO studies, India would continue to have the largest rural population in the world until 2050. In this scenario, assessing whether participating in the Self-Help Group has any psychological effect on rural women participation would help policy makers to utilize those programmes effectively and differently.

A self-help group usually consists of some individuals, usually less than 20 members, with a relatively homogeneous factor such as economic status or job status. A self-help group is a form based on accessible, bendable, and common faith in which members get together frequently at a set time and place and work towards a prearranged target. The group prepares its own system, policy, and sanctions for violations. The assembly measures and processes, the leadership alters norms, and other groups' actions intend to make possible a SHG's purpose in an involved and self-governing manner. The

objectives of the SHGs go beyond thrift and credit and comprise in the general growth of members in the social, political, cultural and economic region (Sahu, & Singh, 2012).

Most democratic citizens feel that some level of political participation, particularly conventional participation, is admirable and acceptable. But political participation can be hard: One must find time, and perhaps money, in order to participate. So why do people do it? People participate in politics out of a sense of the following:

- **Idealism:** Some participate because they believe strongly in a particular idea.
- **Responsibility:** For many, participation is a responsibility of democratic citizenship.
- **Self-Interest:** A person might work to promote issues and causes that personally profit that person.
- **Enjoyment:** Some simply enjoy public activity, either because of the activity itself or because of the friends they make while politically engaged (Bennett, 2002).

Rational choice theorists have argued that participation, particularly voting, is irrational. In a large country, the probability that one's vote will decide the outcome of an election is microscopic. Because participation has costs (time to vote, effort to learn about the candidates and issues, and so on), the costs of voting outweigh the benefits. In other words, voting does not make sense for people as an activity. Another way to think about this issue is to consider the person who votes because he or she desires to have an impact on the Government. If he or she votes out of a sense that the one vote will make a difference, then this person will be sorely disappointed. The truth is that one vote does not make a difference. At the same time, however, if everyone who votes ceased to believe in the power of voting to effect change, then no one would turn out for elections and the democratic process would stop functioning. Political scientists call this phenomenon the Paradox of Participation (Chakravarty, Kumar, & Jha, 2013).

In some countries, large parts of the population do not participate in politics at all. In the United States, for example, only about half of all eligible people vote in presidential elections. Such nonparticipation signifies a number of attitudes:

- **Contentment:** Lack of participation indicates satisfaction with the status quo—if they were upset about an issue, people would participate.
- **Freedom:** In a democratic society, people have the freedom to not to participate.
- **Apathy:** Many people do not know much about politics and do not care.
- **Alienation:** People do not participate because they feel that no one in power listens to their views and that the Government is, at best, indifferent to them.

Community service is unpaid work that benefits people and organizations in the community. It could mean helping out at a nonprofit agency, volunteering for a special project in the school, or doing something positive to improve the neighborhood. People do community service in lots of different places – parks, libraries, hospitals, art centers, homeless shelters, schools, nature centers, sports and recreation centers, food banks, and places of worship. And there are many different kinds of work that can be done, such as park or neighborhood cleanup, environmental work and landscaping, making repairs, painting, working with kids or the elderly, or doing special community service projects like making cards for soldiers, setting up information fairs, or helping with 24-hour fundraising marathons. No matter what type of work one is involved, community service helps make our community a better place to live.

1. Psychological benefits: Volunteering increases overall life satisfaction and helps one to feel good about oneself because one is helping others. It can also help to decrease stress and ease depression.

2. Social benefits: Volunteering engages individuals with the community, creates special bonds with the population being served, and increases social awareness and responsibility.

3. Cognitive benefits: Volunteering helps individuals to enhance their personal knowledge, grow from new experiences, and develop better interpersonal communication skills.

Participating in community service not only makes a difference to the organization and people being served but also makes a difference to every volunteer career prospects. It also helps students develop civic and social responsibility skills and become more aware of what their community needs.

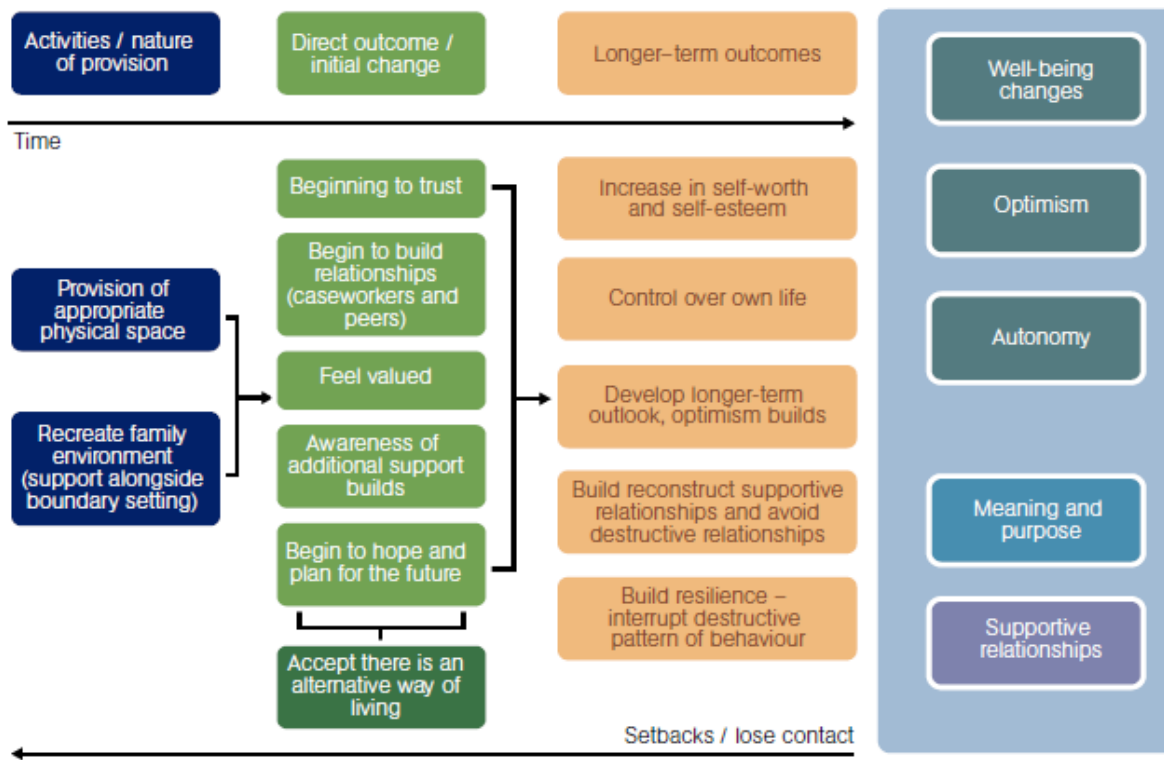


Figure 1. Change and outcomes for women's community Services

2. METHOD

Objectives

- To compare the women's political participation and community service between the self-help group members and non-self-help group members
- To assess the impact of self-help group participation in women's political participation and community service

Hypotheses

1. There will be a significant difference between experimental (participants of SHG) and control (non-participants of SHG) group with respect to improvement in their political participation.
2. There will be a significant difference between experimental (participants of SHG) and control (non-participants of SHG) group with respect to improvement in their community service.

Sample

The sample was selected from 20 villages in two northern districts of Tamil Nadu namely Vellore and Tiruvannamalai. One hundred participants were selected purposively using snowball technique, from 130 SHGs functioning as Women Dairy Cooperative Societies, having a total strength of 1400 members. Individual subjects chosen were part of the SHG for less than five years. Pruning incomplete questionnaires and sample loss due to unwillingness to continue resulted in an experimental group of 70 respondents. A group of 70 women was purposefully selected after matching for age, marital status, and literacy levels to form a matched control group. The members of the control group were selected from the villages where the respective experimental group members were selected. In addition to membership in dairy cooperative SHGs, the experimental group also received STEP (Support to Training and Employment Program for Women). The sampling technique used was a combination of purposive and snowball sampling.

Procedure

Time 1: Pretest Data Collection

At Time 1 or pre-test, phase measurements for psychological criterion factors as well as their demographic details were collected from the SHG members, and their control counterparts were collected using the standardized questionnaires/inventories.

The Pre-test was carried out for about a month. Demographic data sheets and standardized questionnaires were given to them with a request to answer and return them to the investigator immediately. Due care was taken to maintain a good rapport with the SHG members and the control group; all the doubts raised by them were clarified while filling up the questionnaires. All the questionnaires were translated to Tamil language, and the quality of translation was cross-checked by language experts.

The questionnaires were administered to each participant personally. They were included for the study based on their willingness to participate. The investigator outlined the purpose of the study, highlighting what would be required from the participants. Further, they were ensured about confidentiality.

Intervention: Psycho social intervention, empowerment techniques, leadership styles and motivation sessions were conducted for a period of six months.

Time 2: Post-test Data Collection

After six months from the Time 1 data collection, post-test data was collected by administering the same set of questionnaires to both experimental and control groups.

Statistical Techniques

In this study, two groups of individuals were tested at two points in time. Within-subjects factor was two times (Time 1 and Time 2) of testing of the variables under investigation and between-subjects factor was the two groups (Experimental and Control Group). The two groups were comparable on the measure of empowerment using Chi-square with Yates' continuity correction since the variable was categorical and dichotomous.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1: Cross Tabulation of Experimental and Control Group on Political Participation

Group		Political Participation Improved		Total
		No	Yes	
Experimental Group	Count	45	25	70
	% within Group	64.3%	35.7%	100.0%
Control Group	Count	51	19	70
	% within Group	72.9%	27.1%	100.0%

The results presented, in Table 1 indicated that only 35.7 percent of experimental group perceived their level of political participation as improved while 64.3 percent believed that their political participation has not improved. Only 27.1 percent in the control group thought that their political participation improved while a majority of the control group (72.9%) perceived their political participation did not improve.

A Chi-square test for independence indicated that there is no significant difference between the groups in improvement in their political participation, $\chi^2 = 0.829$, $p > .05$.

The illustration in Figure 2 clearly indicates that there was no significant difference between experimental and control group with respect to their perception of improvement in political participation. The number of women who felt their political participation has improved was similar in both the experimental and the control group.

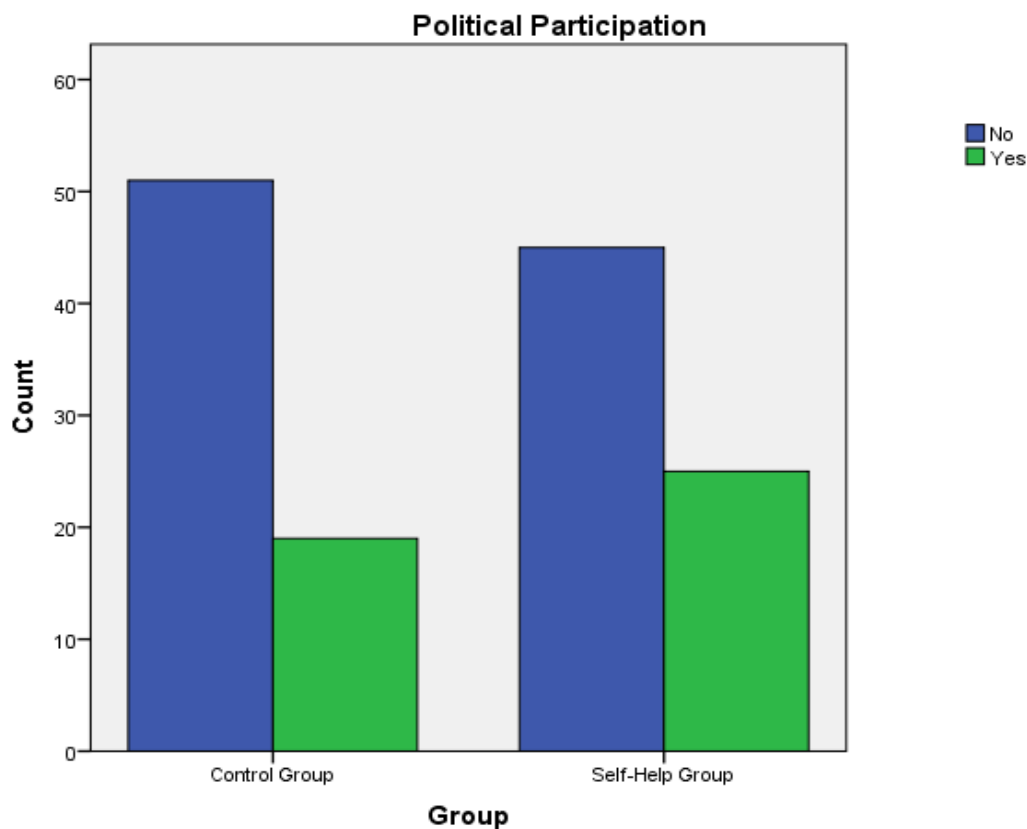


Figure 2: Political Participation of the experimental and Control Group at Time 2

SHG members might not have had any specific leadership roles or political roles, even at the local body levels. This may require more time and sufficient social backup.

India is democratic country that allows any individuals to participate in politics without any barrier since it is a fundamental right of any Indian National as a matter of law. On the other hand, political participation involves many challenges such as allocating time, money, sacrificing personal life and lot of pressure from the opposition or activists. The individuals who have an ability to handle those pressure and problems will be able to continue as a politician. Unlike other countries, in India the politician must find sources of financial funding for the activities. Being a woman is another big risk to become a politician. Indian traditional beliefs can be a big barrier that makes it difficult for a rural woman to express her political interest.

The result indicated that even though rural women are engaging in SHG activities, they do not show any increased political interest since the political participation seems to be riskier than helping the people. This general thought may inhibit rural women to participate in the political activities.

Table 2: Cross Tabulation of Experimental and Control Group for Community Service

Group		Community Service, Improved		Total
		No	Yes	
Self-Help Group	Count	18	52	70
	% within Group	25.7%	74.3%	100.0%
Control Group	Count	50	20	70
	% within Group	71.4%	28.6%	100.0%

The results presented in Table 2 clearly indicated that in the experimental group, 74.3% of the members perceived their community service as improved. Only 28.6 % in the control group thought their community service as improved.

A Chi-square test for independence indicated a significant difference between the two groups in their community service scores, $\chi^2 = 27.480$, $p < .05$ i.e., in favor of the SHG participants.

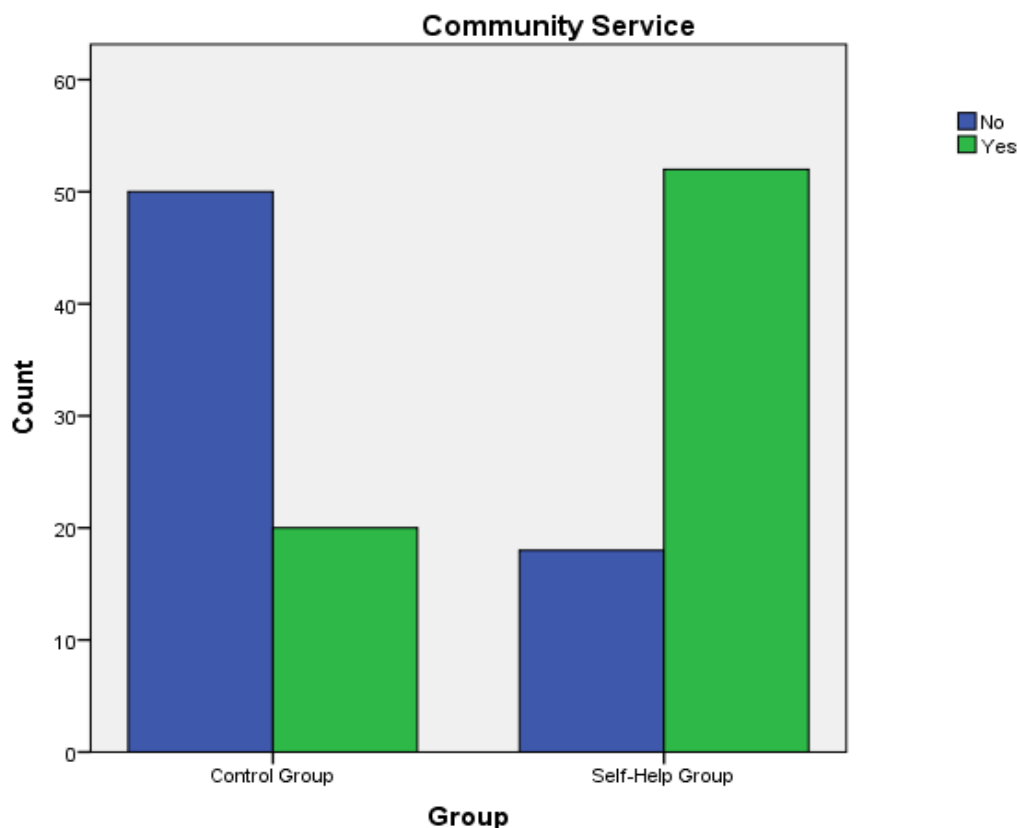


Figure 3. Community Service of the Experimental and Control Group at Time 2

Figure 3 clearly indicates that there was a significant difference between experimental and control group with respect to their perception of improvement in the community service. The number of women who felt their community service as improved was significantly greater in the experimental group than the control group.

SHGs facilitate participation in community services such as rural sanitization, alcohol prohibition, watershed projects, and protesting and acting against child labor. Moreover, engaging in such activities significantly improve SHG member acceptance in the community and society. Sundaram (2012) reported that SHGs can improve community involvement among group members.

Unlike political participation, serving the community has no serious risks, and no one will oppose them as is the case in politics.. The psychosocial intervention to change the rural women's attitude toward politics should be developed. Community service improves life satisfaction (Rani, & Radhika, 2012). Frankle (1959) argued that helping others and working for social cause give meaning to individuals and help them have purpose for their life.

4. CONCLUSIONS

Membership in SHGs did not significantly improve the political participation domain of empowerment among its members. Membership in SHGs facilitated improvements in the community service among its members. The result showed that the SHG activities have significant impact in the psychological aspects of the women. It indicates that social-related activities helps women to improve their wealth as well as their mental health.

Limitations

- The purposive sampling and snowball sampling techniques; hence, the global representativeness of the sample could not be ensured. Cross-sectional analysis limits the ability to identify cause-and-effect relations. Hence, generalizations regarding findings have to be done with caution.

- This study followed a non-equivalent control group (NECG) to measure psychological factors and a post-test only design with non-equivalent groups to measure empowerment. Since both designs are quasi-experimental and lack a control group, cause-and-effect relationships cannot be drawn from the results of this study.
- A longitudinal study with multiple measurements would throw more light on the levels of empowerment and the trend of change over a period.

Implications

- The Government can create more inclusive self-help group activities in order to include large numbers of women, and it improves their community service activities.
- The increase in the women's participation in community services could help to address most of the social problems such as woman empowerment, poverty, women's education, and entrepreneurship.
- Better earning capacity and income provide rural women better status in the home, the community, and the society as a whole.

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