

Engaging with Gender Equity - Dimensions, Manifestations and Perceptions: Experience of Gram Vikas



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Author: R.V.Jayapadma

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Gram Vikas is a rural development organisation working with the poor and marginalised communities of Orissa since 1979, towards making sustainable improvements in the quality of life of the rural poor.

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ENGAGING WITH GENDER EQUITY – DIMENSIONS, MANIFESTATIONS AND PERCEPTIONS: EXPERIENCES OF GRAM VIKAS, ORISSA, INDIA

R.V.Jayapadma

Abstract

Concerns about gender equity have been at the fore of discussions and analysis of NGO interventions and action since the '70s. Gender equity as equal rights to access, opportunity and participation for men and women has always stood out as a distinct feature in the programmes of Gram Vikas, one of the leading NGOs in Orissa, India. Conscious efforts to identify and address these began in the mid-80s. These efforts have at times been intense and focussed, at other times intuitive and seemingly random. All along, however, there have been several initiatives which demonstrate discernable efforts to create a level playing field between women and men in the communities and within the organisation. There have been resistances and challenges to several of these interventions, and while some of them have embedded themselves to create lasting impact, some efforts have been mere flash in the pan, with limited effect.

This article documents the experiences Gram Vikas in promoting gender equity among the rural communities it works with and within the organisation.

Key words: Gender equity, rural communities, NGOs

Engaging with Gender Equity – Dimensions, Manifestations And Perceptions: Experiences of Gram Vikas, Orissa, India

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Whenever an organization intervenes in the life of a community it has the on-going choice as to whether to challenge or support existing community gender-related norms (Rao, 2003).

Concerns about gender equity have been at the fore of discussions and analysis of NGO interventions and action since the '70s. Most NGO responses and action have largely focussed on gender issues within rural communities. Over time there is a transition from being gender-blind to varying degrees of gender-sensitiveness, as demonstrated in strategies, processes, programme interventions and outcomes. The process of social transformation is slow and arduous and NGOs continue to face the challenge of 'institutionalising' these processes, as they 'withdraw' or their role within the communities diminishes.

In recent years, questions have been raised about the behaviour of NGOs themselves, and gender issues 'within' have come to the fore. It is acknowledged that to be effective engines of social change, power hierarchies and institutional biases embedded within organizations, need to be understood, questioned and changed. A lot of effort has gone into building knowledge, skills and attitudes of staff working with NGOs as well

as the communities they engage with. This paper documents the experiences of Gram Vikas, an NGO working in the state of Orissa, India, in engaging with issues of gender equity,

2.0 THE ORGANISATION AND ITS MISSION

Gram Vikas in its mission states that it works 'to promote processes which are sustainable, socially inclusive and gender equitable, to enable critical masses of poor and marginalized rural people or communities to achieve a dignified quality of life'.

A non-partisan rural development organization working in Orissa, one of the poorest states in India, Gram Vikas was registered under the Societies Act 1860 on January 22, 1979. It reaches out to over 30,000 families in the hinterlands of Orissa, of whom 40% are from Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. Rooted in poverty and entrenched in patriarchal systems, the levels of gender inequity vary among these communities.

Gram Vikas' founding team was led by Joe Madiath, who in response to the refugee crisis in the aftermath of the Bangladesh war of independence (1971) led a group of volunteers called the Young Students Movement for Development, Chennai to work in the refugee camps. This was followed closely by relief action after a devastating cyclone ravaged

coastal Orissa. Following these experiences, a few volunteers from YSMD and some local youth came together and dedicated themselves to work with rural communities, especially the underprivileged in the hinterlands of Orissa, leading to the eventual founding of Gram Vikas.

Gram Vikas is today one of the largest NGOs in Orissa (in terms of outreach, budget and staff) and is recognised nationally and internationally for its pioneering work in community mobilisation and rural development. Gram Vikas currently has over 500 full time staff, and over 1000 volunteers (paid and unpaid) at the village level. Its operations are spread across 20 field offices in 15 backward districts of Orissa. The field teams are supported by teams in administration, accounts and PMED (Planning, Monitoring, Evaluation and Documentation). About 25% of the staff are women, interestingly, located at all levels of the organisation.

3.0 DIMENSIONS OF ENGAGEMENT WITH RURAL COMMUNITIES

Work was initiated in eleven tribal villages in the Kerandimal hills of Ganjam district in 1975. On making initial contact, the tribal communities were withdrawn and suspicious, having suffered decades of exploitation at the hands of 'outsiders'. Health conditions were very poor, and people were routinely victims of malaria, tuberculosis, diarrhoea, etc, which often turned fatal in the absence of timely and adequate treatment. The Gram Vikas team made a tentative entry into these villages using health services and started treating and training people, gradually gaining acceptance and trust of the tribal people. They soon found that the levels of indebtedness among the tribal communities were alarmingly high.

Struggling to cope with a monetised economy, people had been reduced to bonded labour after mortgaging everything they had – their land, trees, and even their children. Gram Vikas brought people from over 60 people together to fight against the liquor merchants and moneylenders. Women were at the fore, especially in countering the liquor merchants, and resolutely opposing the making, consumption or sale of liquor in the region. After systematic surveys, using the instrument of moratorium on rural indebtedness, people's courts

were organised to settle the debts. For the first time in decades people experienced what it was to be free, to be in control, once more, of their destinies.

This initial work with the tribals of Kerandimal created the space for Gram Vikas to launch long term development programmes among them. The establishment of secure livelihoods and income sources was a key necessity and tribal people, mostly men, were linked with banks for small loans. People were also encouraged to start small savings – both women and men got involved in this. Conscious efforts to understand the gender dynamics or make targeted efforts were limited. By the early-80s Gram Vikas was working with a range of interventions among the tribal people in education – for children and adults, community health, livelihoods promotion, and building people's organisations. They extended to work with tribal communities in other districts as well.

Parallel to the work among tribal communities, the other significant programme intervention of Gram Vikas in biogas promotion was initiated in the early 80s. In the beginning, however, Gram Vikas came to do biogas almost by accident. While establishing their base at Mohuda in 1975, there was no access to electricity. All cooking, heating and lighting needs depended on firewood. With the dung produced at the demonstration dairy farm a biogas unit was start for their own needs. The forests in the vicinity were threatened by indiscriminate felling of trees, both by the locals and by timber traders from the plains. This is when Gram Viaks decided to take the biogas technology to the villagers as a cheap alternative means of energy. That it improved women's lives significantly was understood and articulated only later. Initially, it was taken up mostly in the non-tribal villages where people had more cattle heads.

By the mid-80s, there were a few significant things happening. The integrated community development work among tribal people and biogas promotion had distinctly separate management structures, with little overlap and collaboration. Within the organisation, the former approach was construed as process oriented 'software development' focussing on building capacities, while biogas promotion was identified product-oriented 'hardware development'. The organisation itself had started growing, number of staff

increased as several educated youth from the region joined. Local youth were also recruited as volunteers, facilitators at the village level. Specific efforts were made to recruit women among the staff to work with women at the community level. The multi-faceted work among tribal communities and the single-focus biogas programme and were conceptualised, managed and implemented as different, a divide which is reflected within the organisation even today.

3.1 Integration of the 'hardware' and 'software'

Moving on from the nascent informal operations, the organisation was beginning to be formalised. The organisation characteristics were being defined with the articulation of the mission/ mandate, definition of functional areas giving character to the organisation structure, and conscious efforts to develop capacities of human resources. The cultural, socio-political and technical dimensions of Gram Vikas were also beginning to be defined.

A decade later in the early 90s, pilots of Gram Vikas' current flagship programme MANTRA were initiated, focussing on all-round community development using water-supply and sanitation as the rallying point to bring people together. MANTRA is path-breaking in its design in ensuring social and gender equity, which put the onus squarely on the community, but also places the burden on staff to ensure that essential conditions are not diluted. One of the key principles for MANTRA taking off in a village community is 'all or none' – the initiation of Gram Vikas' interventions is contingent upon agreement and participation and financial contribution by 100% of the families in each village habitation. Even if one family backs out, the programme will not be initiated, and it is upto the villagers to resolve conflicts and ensure there is 100% consensus throughout planning and implementation of the programme. The experiential learning in the process of working together cutting across barriers of gender, caste and class sets the stage for a new social dynamic to be created in the village.

The village general body is formed with all adult women and men in the village. In the initial stages there are separate general bodies for women and men, to allow women to develop confidence to articulate their needs and concerns. The

general body elects an executive committee, which has an equal number of men and women and proportionate representation of different sections of the village. This forms the base of the democratic governance system in the village. The intervention has clear plans of sustainability and withdrawal, creating a corpus of community fund in each village. Subsequent to water supply and sanitation systems, each community makes plans for its future course, leveraging resources from the government, developing watersheds, initiating new livelihood activities, improving education and health.

Through MANTRA, Gram Vikas also made an effort to bridge the divide between the biogas and tribal development interventions, encompassing the learning from both, putting to rest the debates on 'process' vs 'product' and 'software vs 'hardware'. In essence it was the marriage of the feminine and masculine characters of Gram Vikas.

4. MANIFESTATIONS OF INTERVENTIONS IN RURAL DEVELOPMENT

At the community level, there were proactive efforts from very early days to involve women. Specific focus was given to increasing women's participation in the Kerandimal Gana Sangathan in the movement against landlords and liquor merchants. The women spoke out against the ill-effects of alcohol consumption and the absolute levels of bondage that their families found themselves in. They fired entire communities into action against the injustices of the moneylenders and liquor merchants. The next action was to undertake 'social forestry' where the drudgery faced by women in collecting fuel and food from the fast receding forests was a key concern. To ensure that they had control over the management of these forests, women tended a separate portion of the forest as their own, keeping careful watch, distributing benefits equally among themselves. Afforestation through social forestry programmes and kitchen garden initiatives have improved access to fuels and nutritional intake of the family.

There was also the realisation that special efforts needed to be made to direct loans for income generation activities to women, else it would be entirely cornered by men and often not utilised appropriately, nor repaid in time. The idea of self-

help groups exclusively for women was mooted around this time.

Biogas, along with water and sanitation are both programmes explicitly aimed at reducing the drudgery for rural women. With biogas, women no longer had to breathe in lung-fuls of smoke while cooking or spend days fetching fuel-wood. Similarly, piped water supply to each house ensured that women did not spend a better part of the day fetching water for household needs. Gram Vikas' intervention in sanitation and water supply is perhaps the only one which insists on delivery of piped water to individual toilets, bathrooms and kitchens.

A tale of toilets, water and women

The learning came from the early days when they had tried to build pour-flush toilets where water had to be fetched from stand-posts shared by every 5-10 families. The burden of fetching water from the stand posts and cleaning the toilets fell quite naturally on the women, most often the young daughter in-law. Over a few days cracks started appearing in the toilet-pans making them unusable. Investigations revealed that the young women were deliberately throwing stones into the pans, not relishing the idea of fetching water to clean the shit of all the household members. Water supply through pipelines, with tap connections in every toilet was an effective solution for the problem. Further, wherever possible, it was ensured that this would be available 24 hours of the day, eliminating the need to store water in the houses.

The initial design contained only a stand alone toilet for every family. Bathing, washing, etc still happened at the village pond or well, often together with the livestock. Women were circumspect in cleaning themselves in public. The addition of a bathing room to the toilet created the necessary privacy and increased their sense of dignity and well-being.

The additional import of these experiences was that it was essential to consult and involve women in planning, implementation and review of projects else failure was imminent.

The toilet and bathing room apart from creating an environment of sanitation, for the first time gave women the privacy where they no longer had to wait for the cover of dark to relieve themselves or clean themselves surreptitiously. Young daughters were soon asking their parents to get them married only into villages which had similar facilities. Most importantly by fostering good health in the community, these technologies reduce the women's burden as care givers as well.

To reach out to women who were primary users of the biogas stove, a mobile women's unit established, connecting female workers to household members, ensuring an open exchange of skills and information regarding the use and maintenance of technology. The effort, however, was grounded after a short run, because it was resource intensive, but also because women were given a jeep to travel, and this idea was not acceptable to the male staff.

Building skills to redefine traditional roles

While a large part of the construction work relied on men working as masons, and women assisting as unskilled labourers, Gram Vikas initiated work in a few villages where women were also trained in the construction and maintenance of biogas plants. Later, in course of the water supply and sanitation and housing programmes, there was more systematic training of women in construction. Initially hesitant, fearing ridicule, a small group of twenty women came forward in 2000 to undergo training as masons. The women were quick to pick up the skills. Yet, they were dependent on Gram Vikas to keep them employed as masons, else they tended to slip back to working as unskilled labourers. The market was not ready to accept women masons, and women themselves needed to develop greater confidence to work outside as 'masons'. Gram Vikas consciously gave the women masons a gradual public exposure, in the course of constructing public buildings, invited by the government to re-build schools after the cyclone in 1999. Working as masons also required women to be mobile, and soon they were taking small loans to buy bicycles. Over 500 women have been trained as masons so far, and working in small groups, they have been able to find work locally. They serve as role models to other women now.

One of the early actions of Gram Vikas is to bring together all women in the village forming the women's general body – the mahila samiti. The mahila samiti is commonly an aggregation of self-help groups of 10-15 members, on the basis of household clusters or hamlets. The mahila samiti and self help groups are the main channels through which Gram Vikas supports women's economic and socio-cultural right to self-determination. The mahila samiti is often the first space where women come together and discuss issues of common concern, and find their own solutions. Women's groups go beyond the narrow definition of working on savings and credit, and take up social action including addressing polygamy, early marriage, alcohol abuse, wife beating, wage inequities, etc. Women come together to hold rallies and demonstrations spanning surrounding villages. Rampaging home breweries in the village vicinity, demanding for the protection of the law against illegal alcohol merchants, demanding at the block office to stop giving licenses for the brewing and sale of alcohol are some of the tactics utilised by the women in their effort to rid their community of this menace.

The savings-credit and self help groups are supported to take on management of their functions and augment their incomes through various activities based on local resources and skill. Internal credit is encouraged and there is high turnover of funds in most groups. These groups also gradually replace the dependence on moneylenders and make money available in the time of need at reasonable rates. Several groups are linked with bank credit and matching grant support which has helped spur the economic activity and finances of women. Support in terms of management trainings, trainings for income generating activities, leadership development, exposure to other groups in other villages etc are all part of the capacity building activities that we carry out in order to make the groups self reliant and sustainable.

The groups are also capacitated to work together with the anganwadis, auxiliary nurse, midwife and public health centers in immunization coverage, care of expectant mothers, running drug distribution centers etc. Women are also taking up responsibilities in monitoring the village schools,

ensuring that all children attend school regularly, the teachers come regularly, participating in parent teachers meetings and help in accessing facilities for the school locally and from the Block Office. There is special focus in ensuring that all girl children attend school. Pre school centers (balwadis) ensure that older siblings (mostly girls) are not burdened with care and support of younger children. The residential schools of Gram Vikas offer free education for tribal girl children to encourage more girls to study upto high school.

The self help groups and mahila samiti help women take small and tentative steps in self-assertion within the household and in the community. Slowly their confidence increases till they are able to actively participate in collective decision making. The self-help groups help in creating spaces for women in largely uncontested domains. The creation of these separate spaces for women, are critical to their subsequent integration with the collaborative spaces with men, where for the first time they sit on a common platform and begin to voice their opinion on a public platform on issues related to the community. This by itself is a significant first step, marking a fundamental transformation in the social organisation of rural communities.

Gram Vikas' norms stipulate participation of all adult women and men in the village general body, equal representation of men and women in all village committees, and at least 30% of the office bearers as women. Conscious efforts are made to bring men on board with these efforts. The response varies across villages, depending on the leadership and initiative of both men and women to allow women to participate in the public domain. In some villages, the participation is limited to Gram Vikas' programmes, while in others, it has transcended to a deeper and more permanent change. The leadership in these villages, and their ability to be inclusive, to function in a democratic manner and resolve conflicts is recognised and reflected in neighbouring villages and in the functioning of the Panchayats.

5.0 BUILDING A GENDERED ENVIRONMENT 'WITHIN'

Within the organisation itself, the first recorded capacity building workshop for women staff was

conducted in 1985. This was driven by increasing number of women being recruited for interventions in community mobilisation, education, health, etc. Women staff were also encouraged and exhorted to take on greater responsibilities. Working in remote areas, security of all staff, especially women, was an area of concern, and special efforts were made to ensure it. Some measures included organising appropriate separate accommodation for men and women in field offices, ensuring women staff were accompanied when they visited remote villages, or travelled at late hours.

Sporadic efforts at sensitisation of staff on gender issues were carried out in meetings and workshops. By and large, however, gender was understood, by both men and women, as a stand alone issue, concerning women. In 1992, a Women's cell was formed to encourage women staff to come together and discuss issues of common concern. A series of workshops were held for women staff. There was initial interest and enthusiasm, but gradually the effort tapered, as several women felt uncomfortable that the process was too intrusive into their personal lives and behaviours. Men in the organisation felt further alienated in the process as well. Over a year, the Women's Cell closed as the prime movers left the organisation.

In 1993, the first joint gender sensitisation workshop was organised and in 1994, a report documenting the efforts in working with gender issues at Gram Vikas was prepared. The Women's Cell and the documentation were supported by the Ford Foundation. Unfortunately, there were limited efforts to work on the findings of the report and incorporate them into subsequent planning and activities in Gram Vikas, primarily because there was no one at the time to take it forward.

Over the next few years efforts in addressing gender issues were again sporadic with a few trainings here and there. There were no systematic efforts to integrate gender in planning. Intuitively, however, efforts to integrate women in community level interventions continued, under a predominantly male leadership.

In 2000 there was a return to consciously understanding and addressing gender issues. The process was triggered by the deputation of a facilitator from SDC to Gram Vikas to facilitate

the gender process. Over the year, an inclusive gender policy was drafted. The process of drafting the gender policy involved several people in the organisation across field and office teams, programmes and projects.

Gender Policy of Gram Vikas

The goal of Gram Vikas' Gender Policy is to promote equality between women and men, enabling them to become active partners in the process towards the achievement of dignified quality of life and the transformation of society. The gender policy serves as orientation and support in the achievement of the following objectives:

- Enhance women's and men's equal participation in the sustainable process towards a dignified quality of life
- Empower women to realise their full potential as human beings and actors in development at par with men

In addition to the gender policy there was also a definition of 'mechanisms and structures' for promotion of gender equality within rural communities

Mechanisms and structures for the promotion of gender

1. Any formal or informal structure will have at least 40% women members. In all mixed groups, at least one of the elected office bearers will be a woman.
2. Each village, area and project should have a women only committee to provide a space for women to share and to promote leadership. Village level women committees (e.g. self help group SHG, VEC) would meet monthly, area level meetings every two months, and at project level meetings quarterly.

3. To facilitate these women's meeting, to encourage open discussion and to promote gender equality, we propose to place one women staff at project level, responsible for gender and one additional programme (e.g. SHG, saving and credit, health, agriculture).
4. Residential schools should have a minimum of 50% girl students
5. At village level schools, 100% enrolment and attendance of boys and girls is targeted.
6. All SHG/ Saving and Credit Groups need to be managed by the group members themselves. This is especially important for women's groups and should be supported by respective capacity building.
7. In all capacity building and skill development (agriculture, horticulture, veterinary, animal husbandry, Leadership, etc.) activities, women and men should be given the same opportunities.
8. Financial and technical support (in agriculture, horticulture, livestock, sanitation etc.) needs to be given to both women and men.
9. Large loans will be given in both husband's and wife's name. Loans, which the women utilise, must be given in her name.
10. If Gram Vikas supports a family to get government land, the patta should be given in both names.
11. Gender and social issues should be regular agenda points at the monthly review and planning meetings, at staff meetings and village meetings

A series of gender awareness and sensitisation workshops were organised for staff and community members. For the first time, there were specified codes in ensuring that gender concerns were addressed in all interventions at the field level. This was followed up quickly by a series of 'gender workshops' to identify key areas of concern and prepare action plans. Guiding principles for gender sensitive planning were also defined, together with strategies and measurable indicators. These were embedded within the planning, monitoring and documentation system.

Guiding principles for gender sensitive planning

- People – both women and men – need to be in the centre of planning and decision making, as they are the main responsible for the implementation of the project and long-term management and maintenance of the assets created.
- Gender sensitive planning means, that both women and men are consulted and involved in the planning process – together, or wherever needed in separate groups (because women may not be used to or too shy to talk in mixed groups).
- Gender does not mean to design "women's programmes" or to tackle "women's problems", but to involve both women and men in project planning and implementation, and to ensure, that both benefit from the project intervention.
- It needs to be considered that interests and objectives of men and women may be common, while some may be different, related to the gender division of labour and gender access to/ control over resources.

Questions to ask:

- Who is the target (both direct and indirect) of the proposed project? Who will benefit? Who will lose? If the "family" is the target: will both women and men, girls and boys, benefit equally? E.g. from housing, land improvement, pond work, etc.
- Does the project intervention confirm or challenge the existing gender division of labour, tasks, responsibilities and opportunities? E.g. who does the manual work, who supervises, who learns new skills?
- Development interventions may have different implications for women and men (agriculture, social forestry, water sanitation), which has to be considered. If negative impacts on women or men may be anticipated (e.g. increased workload, loss of control over resources, only men learn new skills, etc.), what activities can be planned to counter-balance these perceived impacts?

To ensure the continuity of these processes, the planning and monitoring systems were reviewed and re-defined. Together with this, bi-annual gender reports were prepared, analysing gender-disaggregated data from field projects. Discussions of gender issues were backed by empirical data and not intuitive awareness alone. Initially threatened and defensive, field staff gradually acknowledged the data. This led to a great deal of questioning and introspection and provided new insights for strategising and initiating clearly directed efforts in addressing issues of gender equity.

In spite of these processes in embedding gender within the organisation, it has always been difficult to sustain, since working on this has always necessitated additional effort in collating, analysing and understanding data. By and large field staff do not consider this their primary responsibility to collect and analyse data and feels it takes away time and energy from the 'main activities'.

5.1 Challenging stereotypes and nurturing human resources

It is significant to note that there are women in all positions in the field and office, and no position is necessarily occupied by men only. The profile of Managers indicates that since the 90s, 30-50% have been women at any point in time. When this is extended to include field project coordinators, it becomes sharply skewed towards men (>90%). Taking account of all staff at the field and office, about 25% are women.

There are constant efforts to increase the number of women staff at all levels. There are several limitations, especially given the nature of work which involves travelling to and living in remote rural areas with poor facilities (often no toilets or water on tap, no electricity, etc) and limited connectivity (no roads, telephones, etc). Families of young women and often the women themselves, with their protective upbringing are reluctant to work in such areas, even though assurance and adequate support for accommodation and security are provided. Proactive efforts have also been made to recruit women from the local areas, limiting the levels of uncertainty or apprehension they might have. Even these efforts have been able to attract very few women, for whom rural areas are still far away and unknown, even though they

may have lived only a short distance away.

Typically, young women after a period of training and orientation, and gradually taking on responsibilities, get married and leave. Younger women join, and they take time to grow in the organisation. The middle level in Gram Vikas therefore faces a serious deficit of women, a gap which is hard to fill.

At the field level, while male and female staff evenly handle community mobilisation, men typically handle the physical activities, including construction of toilet, bathing rooms, water supply systems, houses, digging wells and ponds, securing government funding, etc, while women engage with the 'softer areas' of bringing women out of their homes, organising savings and credit groups, talking about health and education issues, etc. This divide is also seen in identifying staff for capacity building programmes. Men dominate in training programmes for livelihoods activities, leadership programmes – at the community and staff levels, while women are sent to savings and credit trainings, or capacity building in health and education. These contradictions are discussed in gender awareness and sensitisation workshops and reasons sought. The most crucial reason for differences in participation at the community level is one of logistics. Training programmes are held usually at the head office or project office and 1-2 women from every village are invited. It is unthinkable for unmarried girls or married young women to travel on their own to project offices and worse, stay there overnight. So even if women did come it would be the older women, who played little role in using or sharing the skill back in the villages. There have been efforts to change the design whereby 2-3 women from each village can participate, or identifying suitable locations which are closer to the villages so that they can travel. Often the season in which the training programme is organised determines who participates, in synchrony with the livelihoods activities based agriculture, forests, etc.

In recent years there have been efforts to involve and assign roles to men and women staff on the basis of their skills and abilities rather than stereotypical division of functions, but these are few and far between. The reasoning is that male staff cannot talk to or interact with women because

of traditional customs and practices (many women in rural areas still wear the veil). Where there are no female staff, male staff attempt to perform their roles, but they are constrained both in their abilities and willingness to do justice to it, since a large part involves investing time and energies in drawing women in the villages out to meetings, to voice their opinions and to exercise their authority. Often an easier argument is put forward that women staff are more comfortable doing what they do, and not interested in handling construction issues involving organising materials, labour, making large payments, etc.

One female and one male staff are associated in most villages where Gram Vikas works. The female is in most cases younger and newer to the organisation. In a majority of cases, the female staff end up 'assisting' the male staff in matters related to work, but also in areas like preparing food, cleaning the office space, etc. Neither feels that this division is un-natural or objectionable. Discussion of gender issues during sensitisation workshops have led to an acknowledgement of these, but have triggered only marginal changes in subsequent attitudes and relations/ transactions between men and women in the organization.

Gram Vikas also has to periodically deal with the issues arising from relationships' and 'affairs' between young male and female staff working in the same village (or at times relations between staff and villagers). Intervening or mediating in such cases has always been fraught with a great deal of anxiety and secrecy. Such cases unfortunately are not discussed in public. There have been suggestions that there should be clear guidance for moral behaviour expected from Gram Vikas staff and periodic discussion, especially during induction of new staff. These however have not taken root. Responses therefore have been on a case to case basis, with the net result often being that there is inherent reluctance to recruiting and posting female staff to remote areas.

Perhaps the greatest stumbling block in mainstreaming gender has been triggering fundamental changes in attitudes, beliefs and values of staff, who hail come from deeply entrenched patriarchal upbringing themselves. The resistances to change are rarely explicit, but the implicit challenges are evident, both in men

and women. Discussions on gender are often referred to as 'danger' – a play of letters, conveying an inherent reluctance towards acknowledging gender issues or taking action.

Informal discussions with male staff reveal that the way gender sensitisation workshops are conducted and the entire discourse on dominance by men and discrimination of women unfolds and customs and patriarchal relations are challenged, creates a sense of threat, alienation and withdrawal. There is greater emphasis on 'women's empowerment' rather than on 'gender equity'. There is no follow-up in terms of enabling men or women to deal with these dilemmas and helping them to bring about changes. There are no clear follow-up plans. Going back to 'work as usual' after the workshop, old behaviours and attitudes are perpetuated.

6.0 ISSUES IN INSTITUTIONALISING GENDER EQUITY

Gram Vikas has some well directed programmes addressing women's physical needs in rural areas, freeing them from the drudgery of daily chores. The stage is also set for women to step out of their houses into the public domain. How well women capitalise these spaces, and how far men are willing to allow them has depended to a large extent on the preparedness and initiative of communities and at times the hand-holding and inducement provided by Gram Vikas staff working in those areas. The seeds for transformation are sown, but beyond this the process survives and thrives, largely on the nurturing provided by local conditions. Gram Vikas has no clearly defined process for following through into creating lasting social change.

The strength of Gram Vikas' interventions is the involvement of women and men of all sections of the community from the very beginning, and the close link of people-centred community development and women's empowerment. The satisfaction of women's practical gender needs, especially easy access to clean water, sanitation/privacy, fuelwood and opportunities for income generation, are embedded in an overall community programme and vision – and is not an isolated women's programme. The provision of infrastructure for individual benefits is closely linked to the development of the community as whole, individual gains with community gains, each reinforcing each other.

From the perspective of village women and men, the most important and most visible change in gender relations that took place in villages where Gram Vikas intervenes is that in four to five years there are changes in the interaction between women and men at community level, with women pro-actively participating in village meetings and community development. This happened in a gradual process with the women first coming together separately, gaining confidence and then participating in a common meeting with men. In an environment where men and women sitting on the same mat and women showing their face to older men are considered taboo, sitting and jointly discussing on issues of common concern is seen as a big step forward in triggering change in social relations.

Changing attitudes, changing relations

A villager expressed that earlier the men were thinking that women couldn't do anything. But now, seeing that women are taking equal responsibilities, the men are convinced that women can do it. Another village leader famously commented - "So now women will wear pants and go out of the house and men will wear bangles and stay at home". His wife went on to become leader of the women's group. Questioned again on his comment after a few years, he refused to admit to what he said with the comment - "this is a village and a hunder people will say a hundred different things. This is the 21st century after all - women should have the same opportunities as men. You see, the root of all problems is illiteracy - once that is addressed things will change."

Deep rooted and fundamental change takes many years, but with the thawing of relations, the stage is set for transformation. Women's participation initially is limited to Gram Vikas sponsored interventions, rather than extending to include all aspects of community development. "Women sit together with men in Gram Vikas meetings, but not otherwise" - a villager remarked. Gradually women

enter other spaces of decision making, but the pace is set largely by the communities, with Gram Vikas making very little proactive efforts in this regard.

A second major change is seen in the interaction of women with outsiders. Women's mobility is increased. The first step toward these changes had to be taken by men, by allowing their wives to step outside the traditional confines. Due to these new interactions, women learn new things, their horizon is enlarged, they grow in confidence, and thus enrich the discussions in the meetings and the development of the village.

The mechanisms and structures set up to promote equal participation are powerful tools to sustain the implementation of gender-balanced programmes (insistence on 100% coverage, 50% participation of women, establishment of women only saving groups and introducing women supervisors). Though these mechanisms may be implemented in a mechanical manner, but they guarantee a bottom line: women are addressed and involved in the programme.

Gram Vikas through its various interventions creates an encouraging environment for women to develop their skills, self-confidence and self-esteem. The programme may be the only platform, which allows women to come out to participate in community development, in which they develop new outlooks and behaviours. Thus it contributes to women's empowerment, with a potential of gradually leading towards a change in power relations.

With the increased participation of women in community development, women are venturing into "men's domain". Their contribution, however, does not seem to be accompanied by increased control over resources or involvement in decision-making. Little to nothing is known about possible changes in gender relations within the family, about intra-household collaboration and conflict. The capacity to make and enforce decisions is a form of bargaining power, and it is seen as a function of different factors: 1) access to and control over resources, especially land, 2) access to income, 3) access to community resources such as common village land or forest land, 4) access to traditional social support systems, and 5) access to state support or support by an NGO.

In spite of many changes in attitude and behaviour, and with women venturing into new fields, the traditional gender division of labour and responsibilities is largely confirmed: men take charge of construction, accessing resources from the government, etc., while the responsibility for cleaning and hygiene is laid in the hands of women. In saving groups, women discuss saving, cleanliness of the village, health, immunisation, antenatal care, children's education, etc.

6.1 Changing from within to trigger changes outside

The greatest constraint is the lack of sensitised and skilled staff at Gram Vikas, most of who come from traditional patriarchal backgrounds, which does not believe in gender equality. Gender sensitization and awareness processes, while building knowledge and skills, and influencing overt attitudes, have stopped short of triggering fundamental changes in individual and organisational behaviour. Engineering these deep changes in organisations need time and the right kind of sustained facilitation which has been lacking in Gram Vikas.

The concepts of gender equity and equal participation of men and women are new and not adequately understood. Interventions in gender equity by and large continue to be equalised with women's development.

Analysis and reflection on gender concerns on a continuing basis have been championed by a few people in the organization, usually women in leadership positions and once they leave the rigour in analysing gender concerns has taken a back seat. For the rest of the organisation and others in leadership positions gender is important but not 'top priority'. At the same time, not all women in senior positions in the organisation have been champions of gender issues, and not all men indifferent either.

The consciousness and questioning of gender issues has also been kept alive by donor organisations and board members. On both occasions that systematic work was initiated in Gram Vikas, the prime movers were donors - Ford Foundation in the 90s and SDC in 2000. This process was in itself reflective of the growing consciousness of gender concerns world wide. This however does not mean that the entire process was foisted down on Gram Vikas. While it was acknowledged in Gram Vikas that gender was important, it did not have the human or financial resources to work consistently on it, and support came from the donors, for whom it was an important agenda.

Interestingly, Gram Vikas has also over a period of time instituted external evaluations of its programmes and activities. These evaluations have also played a critical role in the articulation of gender concerns. In the external evaluation instituted in 2001, Gram Vikas invited a gender specialist to specifically provide feedback on the gender aspects of its interventions. Board members, significantly, the lone woman member till 2002, consistently raised concerns about gender equity in Gram Vikas' interventions and within the organisation and made suggestions for improvement. After the external evaluation of 2001, there were conscious efforts to induct more women into the Board, and women's membership currently ranges between 30-50%.

The gender sensitisation of Gram Vikas staff is crucial for the promotion of gender equality. Capacity development in conceptual clarity, gender analysis techniques and gender-sensitive planning methodology needs to go along with awareness creation. It is a long-term process, without quick results to be seen, but without it, the objectives in gender cannot be achieved.

7.0 CONCLUSION

Gram Vikas has specifically formulated strategies to promote gender equality and transform existing unequal gender relations in rural communities. This has been done through:

- promotion of equal participation of women and men in community activities and decision making,
- empowerment of women, through creation of separate spaces, and a gradual integration into the collaborative space where they can meaningfully participate.
- involving men, which is a necessary component for the transformation of existing relations.
- nurturing knowledge, skill and attitudes as well as influencing beliefs and values of staff, who are critical 'change agents' in facilitating the process of transformation within rural communities.

Gram Vikas undertakes social mobilisation around a range of techno-managerial interventions directed at improving the quality of life creating a threshold 'quality of life' for rural communities. Interestingly these interventions have a direct impact on reducing the daily drudgery of women. In meeting some basic needs, these interventions form rallying points to elicit the participation of the entire community, and especially the women. Through a gradual process of capacity building, addressing issues of literacy, health, livelihoods and governance, a transformative process is unleashed in the villages.

It is not very clear how much of these changes reflect at the family level, but a dent is made in the prevailing social balance: norms are questioned, roles are re-defined. Sometimes change happens so imperceptibly that it is difficult to see it happen. Where the organisation still faces a challenge is in addressing more deep-rooted social concerns and gender differences, discrimination based on caste, economic status, etc. The change is also

initially restricted to the areas where Gram Vikas' intervention spans, and progress is slow once the initial intervention is complete and Gram Vikas staff withdraw.

Critical in this process are the change agents - the staff of Gram Vikas. A majority of the staff come from traditional middle-class rural families who inherently do not believe in the equality of women and men, and to whom the concepts of women's empowerment and gender equality are alien. From the point of view of an organization intervening to change institutionalised norms, change must happen in two places - outside the organization and within. It goes beyond building knowledge, skills and attitude to transformation in individual and organisational behaviour.

In Gram Vikas' experience, it is essential to embed gender consciousness within all programmes and processes rather than view gender as a stand-alone intervention. Discussions on issues of gender-equity need to be sensitively facilitated, with an understanding of local cultures and idioms, without alienating or creating further divides and prejudices. In understanding gender differences and in the process of challenging fundamental beliefs and values, participants, especially men often feel threatened and withdraw. It is essential to recognise these signs and find ways of addressing these tensions. Among staff there is also an apprehension about balancing gender issues within sectoral interventions and the emphasis on processes while reaching for targets. Whilst some feel that dealing with gender issues makes their work more complex, others think it makes it more effective by linking actions to the realities of women and men. Addressing gender concerns is very process intensive, requiring investment of vast amounts resources – human and financial. These processes need continuous steering and nurturing, and sustained leadership commitment.

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Experience of Gram Vikas

Gram Vikas
Mohuda Village, Berhampur
Orissa 760002, INDIA

Phone : + 680 2261863-74
Fax : +91 680 2264862
www.gramvikas.org