

### **Empowerment of Rural Women: The Deterrents and Determinants**

M. P. Boraiyan, 2008, New Delhi, Concept Publishing, ISBN 10: 81-8069-526-3, hard cover, pp.228+xx, price: Rs.650

This book on empowerment of rural women emerged from a study conducted in Dindigul district of Tamilnadu. As stated by the author, this study highlights the status of women and the process of empowerment of rural women, and spells out what constitutes the process of empowerment, and its contributory and constraining factors. It also provides an in-depth analysis of the lives and works of select rural women. In order to understand the process of empowerment of rural women, a holistic approach of studying it at the individual, household, group and community levels was adopted. The study was conducted in twelve villages from six blocks of Dindigul district during the period of 2004-2006. Women heads of households in the villages, experts on women's issues, academicians, women activists, women heads of non-government organisations, and members of women self-help groups constituted the respondents of the study. Women heads of households were randomly selected while members of the youth clubs and self-help groups, and experts were selected using the purposive sampling method. Survey method was used to collect data. In addition, case study and observation methods were used to generate qualitative data.

The book is organised into ten chapters. The first three chapters present the theoretical background and the methodological aspects of the study. The ensuing five chapters deal with the analysis and interpretation of the data collected in the study. The ninth chapter discusses the policy options for empowerment intervention. Report of ten vivid case studies on the lives of rural women constitutes the final chapter.

The author discusses the process of empowerment of women from a theoretical perspective and then goes on to investigate the current status of this process in a backward rural area. Several aspects of women empowerment are considered in the book. First, the views of rural women regarding the problems of women, and the concept, indicators of and obstacles to empowerment are discussed in detail. Second, the level of the empowerment of rural women is assessed in terms of some indicators of empowerment like freedom in various activities, participation in community life and local bodies, gender discrimination, violence against women, and acquisition of power and influence. Third, views of around 50 women experts on the indicators and dimensions of empowerment, and the strategies and possible contributions of government and non-government agencies for empowerment of women are discussed. Fourth, the rating of a set of indicators of women empowerment as to their relative importance, made by two groups of rural women, is presented in the book. Fifth, perceptions of men about women empowerment, which were collected through focus group discussions with youth club members, are included in one of the chapters of the book.

The book is written well and the contents are organised systematically. Except for a few grammatical errors and some mistakes in tables, the language of the book is simple and user friendly which makes its reading easy.

The review of literature on the concept of empowerment, theories, indicators of and approaches to women empowerment is quite extensive. Disparities in the status of women globally as well as in India have been clearly brought out using a number of indicators, though some of the statistics are a bit outdated. This is a definite advantage of the book as far as students and other academic groups are concerned. The policy options for empowerment of women discussed at the end of the book, including the constitutional safeguards, and other national and international initiatives, spell out strategies for women empowerment and also what needs to be done in

the future. They are useful for students of women's studies as well as development practitioners.

The ten case studies given at the end of the book brilliantly portray the everyday lives of women in rural areas, their struggles, and triumphs and failures. Specifically the case studies point out the roots of women's oppression and the barriers to their empowerment, viz. patriarchal culture, tradition bound social life, lack of education, poverty and ill health. The case studies show how some women have valiantly come out of the oppressive situation with the help of self-help groups and other such initiatives, but mostly because of their determination and hard work. At the same time there are many more women who still are intimidated by the system and are struggling with their lives. Anyone interested in gender issues will find these case studies interesting and educative.

The attempt to consolidate the opinions of women experts and men on empowerment does not seem to have been successful. Even though 90 per cent of the women in this group are post-graduates or Ph.D. holders, the analysis done by them is somewhat superficial. A more in-depth analysis could have been made by such a group of resourceful women. The men who participated in the focus group discussions on their perceptions about empowerment are not a representative group. They belong to the youth group and are most probably better educated than the older group of men, on account of which their views may not be treated as representative of men as a whole.

The idea of empowerment of women is not new. It has been the subject matter of numerous studies and discussions by academia and development agencies. What is different in this book is that it attempted to develop a set of indicators of empowerment from the rural women themselves. Psychological characteristics like self-confidence, fearlessness, desire for gender equality and discomfort with discrimination were rated as major indicators of empowerment by women. There is also abundant literature

that confirms these as very important indicators of women empowerment. However, the author has not used them while assessing the level of empowerment of rural women.

The book has succeeded in reiterating that the obstacles to empowerment and gender equity are deep rooted in the social fabric and it is not easy to overcome them. At the same time it brings out some silver lining by highlighting a few success stories of women empowerment. This book will be useful for all students of social sciences and all those who are interested in doing research in this area.

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