



**Empowerment of Women in Haryana: A Study of
Sakshar Mahila Samooch (SMS) Scheme**

Ph.D. Thesis

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Haryana, one of the flourishing states of India has shown remarkable economic growth in the post-independence era yet in spite of the economic prosperity, the recognition of social problems in the State is delayed. Using *Ghunghat* (veil) is the most potent symbol of Haryana's rural patriarchy. The veil symbolizes control on women, which can only be addressed through a revolutionary step to change the status of women in Haryana (Chowdhary, 2010). The high illiteracy trends among women indicates the social culture barriers in their social development. Poor human development indicators, suggests the need for renewed and focused efforts to achieve its full potential. Despite the high productivity in agriculture, malnutrition and other deprivations including challenges related to the health and nutrition of children remain widespread. Child sex ratio in Haryana was the lowest in India at 834 girls per 1,000 boys as per the Census of India 2011. The amount of unpaid work of 6 to 8 hours a day by a female in the rural State shows her frail social status (Ahlawat, 1995). It is challenging to obtain gender equality in Haryana. However, Women and Child Development Department of Haryana Government has introduced many schemes for the development and empowerment of Women and Child with the support from center and state government and also voluntary sector.

The word 'empowerment' as a terminology has various aspects in socio-culture political contexts. It does not get converted easily into all language. The empowerment consists self- strength, self-power, control, reliance, life of dignity in accordance with, own choice, one's values, own decision making, capable of fighting for one's rights, awaking independence, being free and has an ability, to mention only a few.

The process of empowerment has been defined through bottom - up approach by enhancing assets and capabilities of individual and communities and systematic

change in the process of social inclusion through top- down approach. It is therefore required that systematic change through sustainable strategies to realize empowerment is necessary. It is during the process of social inclusion only, social institutions can be modified to realize equity based economic growth.

SAKSHAR MAHILA SAMOOH SCHEME (SMS)

In the year 2007, introduced a scheme called “*Sakshar Mahila Samooh*” (SMS) i.e. a group of literate and educated women in every village for its overall development specifically of women, children and vulnerable groups. *Sakshar Mahila Samooh* is a non-profit legal entity (registered Society) in each villages across the State. These “*Sakshar Mahila Samooh*” (SMS) entitled to access financial aids for micro credit and various other social and welfare services in the community.

Three worded ‘SAKSHAR MAHILA SAMOOH’ (SMS) that translates as ‘ Literate Woman Group’ signifies the literate women groups in villages of Haryana. SMS is a brain child of the Department of Women & Child Development, Haryana to initiate active participation by the rural women who are literate to bring changes in their community by actively participating in community development process. The formation of grassroots women collectives or community based organization is the main approach which is followed to bring positive change in the community.

SMSs in Haryana are the State initiated and led NGOs working towards the betterment of rural communities of the State. The scheme envisage the important role of educated rural based women in implementing, generating awareness ,transforming and bringing positive change in the rural areas by partnering with State Government Departments to implement various activities like Health awareness, legal awareness, promoting women rights, reaching out to vulnerable communities to address

problems of domestic violence, caste-based discrimination, malnutrition, oversight functions like community development, proper functioning of village based child care centers, seeking accountability from village *Panchayat* etc.

The Researcher here attempted to study the process of empowerment of rural women members working for community development through SMS. The main objectives of the study were:-

1. Study the socio-economic profile of the members associated with Sakshar Mahila Samooch Scheme.
2. Study functions and activities of Sakshar Mahila Samooch.
3. Study the impact of Sakshar Mahila Samooch scheme on the empowerment of women.
4. Understand the role of government departments in the implementation of the scheme.
5. Give suggestions and recommendations in strengthening Sakshar Mahila Samooch in empowering rural women in Haryana.

The study was carried out through a Descriptive Design using mixed method research. The present study was undertaken in 3 districts of Haryana i.e. Sonapat, Panipat and Jind. These districts were chosen due their status of poor sex ratios. Sex ratio also signifies the status of women in that region in terms of her participation in social life, her say in major decisions whether at household level or outside the household. In the present study total nine villages were identified purposely where SMSs were working actively since minimum one year. As per the SMS scheme, the composition of the group consists 25 members that includes one leader and twenty four members. The

total sample in 9 SMS was 225 i.e. 9 leaders and 216 members. The selection of the active SMS was done in consultation with concerned officials from Department of Women & Child Development and Department of Health. These departments are primarily responsible for the formation of SMS groups and distribution of funds for various activities. Further 10 officials working at grassroots level and administrative level were also interviewed to understand their role in implementing SMSs at grass-root level and in empowering the SMS members. To explore and describe the various activities under the scheme, Focused Group Discussions (FGDs) were also held. The researcher also attended meetings of the SMS members to observe the role and participation of SMS members under the scheme.

MAIN FINDINGS OF THE RESEARCH

1. Activities and Role of various Government Departments in empowering SMS:

The State of Haryana lacks credible voluntary organization and creation of such legal entity through the initiation of scheme like SMS may find success in community participation at the grassroots level. In villages there are many types of community based organizations like youth club, mahila mandals, economic self- help groups, village level committee etc. But due to their inactive status they are not able to create any positive impact in the society. Therefore the SMS was initiated with a intent to scale up the number of registered organization so that the development work could be accelerated through these legal entities.

SMSs as State-led NGOs had partnered with different State Departments/Agencies to implement schemes and programs in the villages. SMSs had received implementing projects majorly from Department of Health, Women & Child Development, Women Development Corporation, District Rural Development Agency, Department of

Education, Department of Rural Development, Haryana Power Corporation, District Legal Service Authorities, Forest Department, and National Information Center. The major activities implemented were conducting exclusive programs through flipchart developed exclusively for SMS for health awareness and behavior change in the village, Supervision of *aganwadi* centers, mid day meals, meetings and rallies on social issues like prevention of dowry, female feticide, child marriage, domestic violence etc. Formed Self Help Groups with poor women and held regular meetings, facilitated skill development trainings like candle making, pickle making, *donas*, paper bags etc. Organized short term courses on stitching and tailoring and Beautician skills. Conducted adult education classes in the villages and in brick factories (*BhattaPatshala*) for children of migrated families through innovative education centers. Conducted Village development activities like construction of streets and drainage in the village, ensuring participation of villagers in *Gram Sabha*. Meter reading in the village and bill distribution and bill payment through focal points established within the village by SMS. Working as counselors in Village based legal – aid clinic. Implemented Common Service Centers (CSC) for the implementation of National Digital Literacy Mission like online registration of complaints, online attendance in government offices, online addition/deletion in voter detail etc in the rural areas.

The above mentioned activities were part of projects from various department implemented by the SMSs in the community. But the researcher also identified few specific initiatives by these SMSs which shows that SMSs were instrumental in bringing positive change in the society and therefore some level of impact must have been there in member's empowerment. Some of the important activities that were noted by the researcher mention here are:-

(a) *Anti Alcohol Drive* : The SMS, Village Patti Kaliyana of District Panipat organized anti arrack drive to uproot arrack shop situated within its vicinity by building pressure group. They campaigned at the District Collector's office and demanded removal of shop within 4 Km radius. They also took help of the local print and television media to address the whole situation.

(b) *Initiative to address Gender Bias through renaming ceremony* : The manifestations of gender discrimination in the rural societies may be seen in the tradition of naming the girls born first, second or third in the birth order. Multiple births in order to have a male child lead to giving names which typically means "to stop" or "enough" or "apologies". Names like *Bhateri*, *Baskar*, *Ram Bhateri*, *Hae Ram Bhateri*, *Mafi*, *Antimare* some of the typical names given to girls in the villages. The members of SMS village Patti Kaliyana have taken vow to stop this system and to initiate this they celebrated name changing ceremony in their village.

(c) *Addressing social realities like child marriages in villages* : A very important issue which they address through SMS was preventing child marriages. The group organized *nukkad natak* to create awareness on prevention on child marriages. The group organized awareness program during specific time around the month of April-June, when the maximum case of child marriages take place in Haryana. On the occasion of *dev uthan ekadashi* most of the marriages take place because during this time period as per the Hinduism, birth charts matching can be bypassed to tie knot for marriages and therefore maximum child marriages are also solemnized during this period. The SMS of Village *Chatiya Aulia* ensured maximum awareness among the masses to prevent the incident and the *pradhan* also received confidential complaints from the neighboring villages. She further complaint to the superintendent of police and stopped many child marriages from taking place.

2. **Socio- economic profile of SMS members:**

The distribution of SMS members by age groups revealed that more than half of the SMS members (52 percent) were from 30-49 years of age group. This indicates active involvement and interest of middle aged women in SMS activities. The marital status shows that one-third members of SMS (73 percent) were married, which shows that they had taken up responsibilities to work for the community along with the responsibilities related to family life. The scheme exclusively seeks participation of literate women to uplift the village communities. The data shows that one-third percentage of women (75 percent) had qualification up to Matriculation or Senior Secondary level. The caste composition of SMS members shows that majority (49 percent) were from the general category. This is followed by OBCs forming 28 percent and SCs 23 percent. Survey results indicated that the maximum number of SMS members (61percent) were from nuclear families.

The data shows the member's source of information about the SMS scheme was highest through SMS leaders (48 percent). This shows that the SMS leaders had an significant role in the identification and motivation of rural women to join the SMS as volunteers to work for community development. Also 70 percent women were new members(not working as any other grass-root functionary like ASHA, AWW etc)and their involvement in community welfare may ensure awareness generation in wider community.

3. **Important Factors of the SMS contributing to Empowerment:**

The important factors of the scheme contributing to empowerment of SMS members identified were years of association with SMS scheme, formal and informal trainings attended and other roles and responsibilities discharged by the member like

organizing meetings by the members. These indicates the member relation with the scheme and empowerment at official level.

While studying empowerment it is important to know the individual's association with the particular scheme that may affect individuals' attitude, behavior and actions. The data shows that 44 percent members association had been there since the establishment of the SMS in the year 2007, 25 percent members were associated for the last 3 years, 21 percent members got associated with the scheme during last two years and 10 percent SMS members joined recently by replacing old inactive members. The change in the membership to replace inactive members shows healthy internal dynamics in the SMSs and a sign of empowerment.

The next important factor identified in the scheme contributing to empowerment was formal and informal trainings of the members. It is a tool to influence an individual, group and community at large towards equality through highlighting awareness, learning processes, knowledge-creation and skills development. The study shows that 48 percent members had attended between four-six trainings followed by 30 percent members that had attended between one- three training and only 22 percent members informed that they had attended more than six trainings. The formal trainings were attended only by the SMS *pradhan* (leader) along with two to three members in a each SMS so that they could impart the trainings attained further to the rest of the members. The discussion with the SMS members shows that all the leaders were instrumental in imparting training to their *samooh* members. The trainings attended by SMS members were in different fields that included knowledge -based areas like gender sensitization, social issues like sex selection elimination, prevention of child marriage, etc and skill-based areas like animal husbandry, candle-making, pickle-

making, training on establishing sanitary napkins units and its manufacturing, training on beauty culture and tailoring etc.

The members of SMS scheme were required to perform various roles as volunteers within the community to propagate and disseminate the information in the community. They acquired different roles as per their interest and capacities. The study noted that 36 percent that is maximum members were performing the role of team members only. However they also took up leadership roles but with a meager 9 percent which is very low as compared to the other acquired roles. Almost equal number of members were performing the role of Mobilizer (21 percent) and Educator (20 percent) along with 15 percent members performed the role of Motivator in implementing SMS activities.

To plan and organize activities like rallies, street plays, cultural activities, *mohalla* meetings etc, the *Pradhan(s)* of the SMSs conducted monthly planning meetings for the group members. The data shows that 72 percent members which was the maximum, attended between one-three of these monthly meetings. Members were also contacted informally by leaders to discuss the monthly plans.

While working for village development, a leader alone cannot ensure reaching out to large community. The role of team members in reaching out to large community is essential. The study showed that 80 percent of SMS members were organizing monthly meetings/programs in the community.

The researcher had attempted to see the 'empowerment' of women through their participation in odd hours or urgent meetings. An odd hour meeting is generally conducted in the evenings or it may be an emergency meet to address a particular issue. 70 percent of the members were able to take decision to attend the SMS

meetings on urgent basis or during odd hour. Out of 70 percent of the members 39 percent of the members reported to had attended such meetings always. The study also finds that the regularity of attending monthly meeting had impacted on member's decision to attend urgent or odd hour meetings. Although the odd hour meetings were not mandatory for the members to attend and were mostly convened with the possible availability of the members yet the study shows that the SMS has impacted upon the members in raising consciousness about the issues of the community and the members, who were regular in attending monthly meetings, were also available during the discussions of sudden sprouting issues.

4. Political and Economic Empowerment of SMS :

The SMS scheme has been given oversight functions like ensuring accountability from the *Panchayat*, participation of the SMS leader in the village level committees, ensuring awareness about voting rights and village participation in Gram Sabha meetings, facilitating the implementation and awareness of the government programs and schemes, ensuring transparent Public Distribution System etc. The members of the SMSs were involved directly or indirectly in these areas had shown impact in their political 'empowerment'.

Through the SMS, 40 percent of the members have participated actively in mass demonstration for various issues like removing arrack shops located near the village, a demonstration in District collector's office etc.

The impact of the SMS on members shows that on 48 percent members, the impact on the capacity to question in public has been noted to a great extent followed by 39 percent members with an impact to some extent.

The study noted that little less than half percent of the SMS members raised the certain issues in the *Gram Sabha*. The relation of *Panchayats* with SMSs was not very positive due to the fact that the SMSs were acting as an oversight agent to seek accountability from the *panchayat*. The opinion of the members on increased level of awareness due to their participation in SMS on the relevant political issues shows that only 36 percent of the members opined to agree strongly followed by 56 percent of the members who generally agreed to this opinion. The SMS members in the study area had been involved in campaigns to generate awareness on one's right to vote. There was a considerable impact on 63 percent of the SMS members to cast their vote on the basis of the candidate's background and one-fourth of the members had reported some change in their thought process. The members in the village *Rajpura* and the village *Chatiya Aulia* of district *Sonepat* were fortunate enough to work with an international NGO named PRIA (Participatory Research in Asia). The organization was working in *Sonepat* and *Panipat* districts to create awareness on Panchayati Raj Institution.

The study found that 71 percent of the SMS members were motivated to contest in an election. And 23 percent members had reported an absence of willingness to contest for their political participation. The presence of SMS, as a conscious-raising group, in the sampled villages was significant in identifying the potential candidates to encourage them to participate in the election (Village *Amarheri, Jind*).

The fact of raising important issues by the SMS members during meetings and programs also shows political 'empowerment' through the qualities of a person like leadership and inquisitiveness. The SMS might prove to be a platform for the rural women and specially its members to become proactive in raising their concerns in the

community forums as the study shows that 86 percent members raised their concerns during SMS Meetings/Programs.

The researcher was also keen to know that, with the given status to the SMSs in Haryana, if the members were also empowered economically in the process of empowering the community as it should have happened. The study shows that 80 percent of the members of the SMS joined self-help groups after having joined the SMS. The SMS members were found to have made special efforts in mobilizing and sustaining the SHGs. This is an important finding in the context of SHG movement in Haryana. The members of the SMS were able to mobilize the SHGs since they were already working with the vulnerable families to generate awareness on health, education and the government programs. Secondly, it accelerated the economic ‘empowerment’ of the SMS members in two ways-first, the SMS members became the SHG members and second is that these women, as members of the SMS, formed the SHGs with other target groups like below poverty line families within and in the neighbouring villages as well.

The SMS activities also included giving information on loan facilities, banking and other assets formation schemes to the women from lower socio-economic status. SMS members also took advantage of such schemes and the study shows that 50 percent of the members had been able to own some productive economic assets like sewing machine, buying cattle for economic activities, knitting machines etc through SHG inter-loaning or through other loan related schemes.

The discussion forums in the SMS through the formation of the SHGs helps the rural women to think over their personal expenditure which may affect their health or any other area. 78 percent SMS members felt that they were able to decide to ensure to

have some money exclusively for their personal expenditure. The members who had owned the personal productive assets after joining the scheme showed that more than 50 percent of the members had seen a high impact on their decision on their personal expenditure.

The data also shows that with the empowering education, given under the SMS program, the members were showing increased autonomy of taking decision to save money for their personal use (87%) and the impact more among members with higher education level.

5. Social and Psychological Empowerment of SMS:

The SMS members participation in various social-economic-political activities increased her autonomy to take various decisions and had also impacted her psychological well-being. Few of the important findings shows empowerment of SMS members at social and psychological level.

The study shows that there was a considerable impact on the autonomy of the members to visit their parental home. The percentage of the members had changed to a great extent and it had increased from 31 percent, which the case before joining the SMS, to 40 percent after they had joined the scheme. The impact was highest in the age group of 30 to 49 which shows that they were more tangible and also open to challenge their lives for an improvement. Members with lowest education i.e. primary level education showed very less autonomy in deciding to visit their parents. The total number of members who had attended the maximum monthly meetings were only 49 out of 225. Out of these 49 members 29 members i.e. almost 60 percent reported change to great extent on the decision to visit parental home. The monthly

meetings were the most important factor in bringing change in the mindset, accelerating empowerment among members and further in the community as a whole.

Recreation in the rural areas is a distant thought. Recreation includes attending local festivals and functions. It is an important factor of distressing and revitalizing oneself. But it is a privilege for rural women to have some kind of recreation. The study shows that only 25 percent members reported to had impact 'to a great extent' on taking decisions for recreation after joining *Sakshar Mahila Samooh*. Also more than 50 percent members reported that there is impact 'to some extent'. Taking decision to go out for recreation is also dependant on the age of the person. The study shows that the highest percentage of members with impact 'to a great extent' belonged to the age group of 19- 29. The scheme had no impact in the age group of below 19 years on their recreation however it is essential part of their growth and development.

Impact on ability of SMS members before and after joining the scheme on their ability to decide to visit friends shows percentage of members have increased from 35.38 percent before joining the scheme to 44.4 percent after they joined the scheme 'to a great extent' with total 9 percent increase. The highest percentage increase was noted in the age group of 19-29 years. If we consider at the marital status, the highest percentage with change 'to a great extent' after joining the *samooh* was reported among widow. 18 widow members out of 23 reported change which included both i.e. 'to a great extent' and 'to some extent'.

The use of veil may be interpreted differently in different religions and regions but it certainly shows a patriarchal mindset where respect by a women is paid by covering her face in-front of elders or may be husband and also while moving out in the community. Impact of SMS on member's decision to refuse to observe *Purdha* (veil)

within Family was on 25.3 percent members. Refusal of veil doesn't mean that they stopped covering their head. It was only refusal to cover full face. The study also found that 39.1 percent members reported impact 'to a large extent' in eldest age group. The lowest percentage was noted in the age group of 30-49 with only 18.8 percent. Members with primary & middle education qualification, reported lowest impact on refusal of veil within the family. It is again reinforced here that not just literacy alone but continuous education can bring about social and cultural change because with higher education and increased social awareness one is able to think critically in the light of facts. The caste based data shows that 46.8 percent members from other backward class had impact 'to large extent' followed by 23 percent in scheduled caste and lowest percentage of general caste members *i.e* only 14.4 percent members reported impact to large extent on their decision to refuse *Purdha* or veil while in families. It shows that in Haryana dominant castes are still encouraging the practice of veil. In general category 18 percent members reported no impact on their decision to give up this tradition and still practicing it vehemently.

The data on impact of SMS on ability to refuse to observe veil outside the home (community) shows that there is considerable impact on younger age group and eldest age group. The impact was noted 'to a great extent' on 43.6 percent members in 19-29 years because this is more flexible age and look forward to change in self and their environment. The status of widow had shown a considerable impact with 34.8 percent of the members had reported the impact as 'to a great extent' and 52 percent women had reported the impact as 'to some extent' on the practice of the veil through the scheme as it allows them to bring change in the practices, initiated and accepted by a larger group of women in the community.

The Impact of the SMS on the ability to take crucial decisions regarding children's education, marriage etc. was noted among 90 percent of the members. The member's age shows that maximum number of the members had reported the impact 'to a great extent' in the age group of 30-49 years. The study shows that widow members have been impacted the most 'to a great extent' with 78.3 percent followed by 70.3 percent married women and 50 percent separated women and least with 36.4 percent among unmarried women and adolescent.

Members decision-making ability to take medical treatment for self or children shows that the SMS had impacted around 93 percent of the members. The activities of SMS not only gave a platform for increasing knowledge and information on health but also gave opportunity to discuss personal health problems. The SMS had impacted members from Scheduled Caste 'to a great extent' with highest percentage i.e. 76.9 percent followed by Other Backward Class with 74.2 percent and General Caste with 62.2 percent. The decision related to medical treatment is an significant indicator for women's empowerment.

Researcher studied the impact of the SMS on member's ability in influencing decisions related to issues on family planning. The study shows that 68 percent members were able to influence this decision 'to a great extent' followed by 20 percent members 'to some extent'. An interesting finding was that women from the age group of 50 and above were actively promoting and educating the community about family planning methods.

The *Sakshar Mahila Samooh* had impacted the women to take initiative to acquire and develop further with livelihood skills and even re- start further education by enrolling in school education and higher education. The data shows that 71 percent

members reported that they have taken decision to acquire skill based education after joining as members in the SMS.

The participation in the SMS had brought changes in the psychological make-up of the members. The researcher's interaction with the members showed that their participation in the SMS enabled to explore their potentials which they might not be able to explore, if they had not been given the responsibilities to work with the *samooch*. The study showed that 63 percent members strongly agreed and 31 percent members only agreed to the statement that the SMS was a platform to explore potential. Their participation in the SMS had helped the members to explore their latent qualities like ability to speak, dance, sing, to do creative work like acting, organizing etc. The member's education shows that the highest percentage of members with the opinion 'strongly agreed' were the members with primary education and their percentage is 83.3. Members felt that in the SMS, they started learning again and were able to have better insights about themselves as individuals.

The opinion of members were taken to understand if they were using the SMS as forum to discuss issues like personal problems. The data also shows that 61 percent members 'strongly agreed' to the opinion followed by 33 percent members 'agreed' to this opinion. The *Sakshar Mahila Samooch* operates on the voluntary basis by the members that are educated and are willing to work for the community development. It shows the actively seeking help by the members who were living separate from their husbands due to various reasons and 100 percent members opined strongly that the SMS was a forum to discuss their personal problems.

The identity of members in the community inspires them further to work for community development. The data shows that 71 percent members 'agreed strongly'

that SMS inspired them to work for their village. Another 26 percent members 'agreed' of being inspired by SMS and feel good to work for the betterment of the society. The activism like demonstrations, sit- ins etc for various issues like anti-alcohol, demonstrations against land acquisition etc by the SMSs in the study also shows that members were willing to work for their community. The data shows that the activities under SMS inspires 79.5 percent members in the age group of 30-49 years very strongly followed by 61.5 percent members in the age group of 19-29 years and 60.9 percent members in the age group of 50 and above. It is interesting to know that the SMS has inspired separated and unmarried women strongly followed by married women and widow women members to work for their community.

The scheme required the members to participate in public forums to address larger population from different communities. Formal and informal trainings helped the members to communicate better with the people from all age groups. Communicating or expressing themselves in large forums is an imperative indicator of empowerment which the SMS was able to infuse in its women members. The study notes that 60 percent members 'agreed strongly' that their skills in expressing and communicating had been improved after joining SMS followed by 20 percent member who 'agreed' to this opinion.

The *sakshar mahila samooch* scheme is aptly channeling the potentials of these literate women to unlock the cultural and social barriers of women in rural society. The study shows that 56 percent members 'agreed strongly' that they were utilizing their educational goals through the SMS. There were members which shared that after joining the SMS they felt that should have pursued further studies as they saw many avenues for women like trainer for skill development, community mobilizer, social worker, animator, surveyor etc in community work.

The exchange of thoughts in SMS forums were helpful in strengthening the members to seek social support like inviting family members to support activities of SMS. The data also shows that 56 percent members 'agreed strongly' to the statement followed by 39 percent members who 'agreed' that after joining as members of SMS, they were able to elicit social support to take many important life decisions.

The study finds that in all the SMS groups community initiatives of seeking accountability from the concerned authorities had made the members more alert and curious about the new schemes and procedures. The study shows that 78 percent members 'strongly agreed' followed by 19 percent that 'agreed' that their participation in SMS scheme helped to generate curiosity in them to learn.

CHALLENGES/ IMPEDIMENTS IN 'EMPOWERMENT' OF SMS

a) Lack of exclusive support for active functioning: The researcher, while exploring the role which the State government was playing to empower the community through SMS, found that the SMS is structured well with the ideas, intentions, vision, and ideology. But, like many other welfare initiatives, the formation of State initiated SMSs were lacking exclusive support for active functioning. The thoughts reflected by one of the SMS *pradhan* shows that the state is not aptly carrying out its responsibilities.

"As pradhan, I had applied for a project for starting non-formal education centers through the grants under Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, Department of Education, Haryana. I, as Pradhan, was the only SMS in my district which had applied for the project. There were other NGO competitors too. They enquired about my background and I told that I was pradhan of the SMS of the Amerheri village, upon which the other representatives from the other NGO's sighed and told 'oh' so you are also in the race

now?' I did not react as my focus was to face the panel meeting for getting the project. I and my husband along with my samooch members went inside. During the interaction, the officer was happy to know that our SMS of the village Amerheri is actively working in the community. But he was also doubtful that if the project is granted to us, how well, as rural women organization, we could implement the project. The officer told us that the Department of Women and Child Development was directed to get the consent of the SMSs working in all the districts to implement "Bhata Pathshala" (Non- Formal Education for Brick factory workers) program in the rural areas. But the official information received by the DWCD authorities showed that the SMSs in Haryana lacked interest to take up such initiatives.

Upon this, I strongly replied that the SMSs in Haryana are very keen to work and as 'Pradhad' I can assure you that we have networked with other SMSs across the district Jind and many SMSs are keen to take up such projects offered from various departments.

The officer was highly impressed to know our commitment but was also highly disappointed to know that DWCD which initiated the SMS program was not reaching out to the SMSs for seeking their participation in the community development projects. Finally, after convincing about all these facts, we were given the project which we, later, implemented successfully in our district.

(SMS Pradhan, Vill. Amerheri, District, Jind)

When it comes to its implementation at the grassroots level, it poses challenges for the rural women to work for the community development. As mentioned in the study that the SMS works as a women community-based organization. The State plays a major

role in promoting these women NGOs in order to increase the civil society participation is very important.

b) Not interested to promote the SMS being additional responsibility

The study showed that the nodal department (Department of Women and Child Development) had an additional responsibility to promote SMS. It requires continuous initiatives and a deliberate inclusion of the SMS as Women-NGO partner in the implementation of schemes and programs. The Department of Women and Child development (DWCD), Haryana notes the SMS as great resource pool in changing the situation of women and children in the rural areas. But, 'empowerment' of women by the State requires an in-depth scrutiny of gender relations, that is, the mode in which the power equations between the sexes are demonstrated and maintained. (Adams & Castle, 1994). Keeping this in mind, the SMS scheme should have been taken with an intention to elicit participation of the SMS, hence, empowering the rural women in particular and community at large .

c) Lack of feminist approach - In India, voluntary service is an integral part in the community participation. The deteriorating living conditions in the rural area calls for an existence of the NGOs with active participation for a better socio-economic conditions of the rural masses. The initiation of registration of the SMS to form a legal entity of women's group by the government is a step forward towards the recognition of the important role of rural women in the implementation of government policies and programs but, the question of their sustainability in terms of long term participation needs to be addressed. To further substantiate, it is imperative to note the attitude of higher officials of the Department of Women and Child Development on the opinion about SMS in Haryana.

"SMS are NGOs formed in every village of Haryana, that's the only thing I can tell you, for in-depth information seek appointment at district level".

(As told by Joint Secretary, DWCD, Haryana)

This attitude of high level authority can be interpreted as visionless which further hampered the growth of SMSs in Haryana. The formation of 6247 *Sakshar Mahila Samoohs* speaks only the numbers and, therefore, it requires a much deeper level of intervention and pro-women attitude as it is women-based organization, operating in a social structure of Haryana which is exceedingly patriarchal in nature.

d) Continuous withdrawal of participation by the SMS members -

The engagement of rural women in the SMS is leading to acquirement of skills in multiple areas with improved status of women at individual, household and community level. The financial benefits like getting engaged in micro entrepreneurship, services in government and non-government department etc. are indicators of 'empowerment' but it is still not able to develop collective action at a large level. There are many narratives which are important for the study.

The State Government honored the SMS of the *village Amerheri* of the *District Jind* with State's best SMS award in the year 2011 and again in 2012. The member of the SMS of the village *Amerheri* worked with high spirits. The experience gained by the members through SMS activities were worthy enough to exploit their potentials for the neighborhood community development. But, due to lack of sufficient funds, the members were slowly taking up the employment opportunities which was leading to a withdrawal as active members from the SMS. Although, it indicates 'empowerment' of each individual member, it dissolves the basic idea of developing social capital in the community. Also, it is important to mention that the membership of a voluntary

organization is important but it was observed that the SMS members, who were getting employment opportunities, were leaving the SMS membership also to prevent legal repercussions. The experience of the SMS leader is relevant in this context.

I resigned as pradhan of the SMS for two main reasons. The first one was lack of sufficient time to invest into the SMS activities but the second one is more important, that is to prevent myself from getting into legal complications of having membership of a non-governmental organization. I faced a lot of problems at my workplace due to my membership in the Sakshar Mahila Samooh. My co-workers feel that I earn money from the Sakshar Mahila Samooh projects. They don't understand that I am a volunteer in the SMS. They created uncomfortable environment for me due to which I decided to resign from the SMS as pradhan.

(As told by Ex-SMS Pradhan, Amarheri Village, Dist, Jind)

Another experience shared by a SMS members was:

I along with three other members of our samooh visited two villages to collect the bill reading continuously for two years. The department officials (Department of Power) also assured us jobs in the department but till date we have no information about it. It's been a year now.

(Discussion with SMS Members, Chatiya Aulia Village, Dist. Sonapat)

The above narrative is disempowering and shows ignorance of people about membership with non- profit organization. May be their understanding is shaped through other experiences of how the NGOs in the State are operating. But it certainly has two major repercussions. The first one is the question of existence of active SMSs that are conceptualized to promote voluntary actions in the State and second is

creating unfavorable atmosphere for people who own membership with such voluntary organizations.

e) **Volunteerism not the only way to sustain SMS-** Volunteerism can help a person to become capable enough to bypass the family obligations to contribute to the society and also empowers at the individual level (Butcher 2010). Under SMS, the members are working voluntarily but with some kind of motives like expecting more sustained projects or sustained livelihood opportunities. But it is slowly taking away the spirit of volunteerism and activism. The below experience speaks about the same.

I participated in the samooch with greater expectations but I wanted some kind of financial sustainability which the SMS could not give me due to its irregular funds and lack of projects. I have volunteered myself whole heartedly in SMS activities and learnt that I should learn more about the NGOs. Now I have joined a local NGO to learn the process of documentation and other activities. I am getting Rs. 8000 per months. Now, I am not able to conduct regular activities in my village because the funds are not reaching to us since many months.

(As told by SMS Pradhan, Vill Dhathrath Khurd, Dist. Jind)

The above narrative speaks about the motivational factors behind volunteerism and also the reasons behind growing a disinterest in volunteerism. The SMS scheme is constructive and initiated by the State but it did not evolve on its own. And the volunteerism has evolved in this process through the collective action by the SMS members. The process of ‘empowerment’, however, should increase proactive behaviors, on the contrary, the members are seeking opportunities outside the *samooch*. This is happening due to inconsistent and shortsighted vision of the successive governments. The attitude of the officials from the Department of Women and Child

Development seems to be not encouraging enough for many SMS members to be the part of the SMS.

f) Nothing concrete being done in the name of Women ‘Empowerment’ -

Women ‘empowerment’ is not something new, it's definitely a topic much loved and discussed in the public forums, debated on numerous occasions and stages, promised during the election campaigns but in reality the State has ignored its responsibility to promote women ‘empowerment’ by only introducing new schemes and programs but lack ownership in implementing innovative action plans.

SMSs are the voluntary organizations and they are free to do any work related to woman ‘empowerment’. The government also recognizes the efforts made by rural women through the SMSs that are doing good work in Haryana by honoring them on international women’s day.

(As told by Program Officer, DWCD, Jind)

The above statement given by the official may be interpreted in two ways. On one side, it shows a positive reinforcement by the State to encourage the SMSs to work in the rural areas and on the other side, it reinforces the attitude of the State in keeping women’s development programs alive by introducing new schemes and honoring few to mark women's ‘empowerment’. Rather than supporting the best practices and innovations with better inputs, the State is claiming to be just pro-women ‘empowerment’. To support the second interpretation the following narrative is pertinent :-

Every year, the officials from Department of Women and Child Development come and ask to apply for the best SMS award given on 8th March by the chief

minister of the State. They ask for full detail of proof of the activities conducted by the SMS but I don't want to submit my application as it incurs a lot of costs in compilation. Who will give that money? I don't have funds to do all this.

(As told by SMS Pradhan, Vill. Chatiya Aulia)

The *Sakshar Mahila Samooh* Scheme, as claimed by the State as an empowering scheme for rural women, is in-fact under question. The claim of the ownership by projecting as an ongoing scheme of the Department of Women and Child Development and honoring them in the name of "*Mahila Samman*" shows the state's attitude towards women 'empowerment' policy.

During the implementation of the *Sakshar Mahila Samooh* scheme when the scheme was pumped up with the funds by various departments, the women under SMS have shown progress in their autonomy with many incidents of social activism. But with the change in the successive government, the attention towards its implementation seems diluted. It seems that the successive government are keen to showcase their proactive attitude by projecting schemes on papers rather than appreciating and recognizing the benefits it is generating to the clientele.

g) Corruption and Red Tapism Impeding Empowerment

The major reasons of shutting many successful schemes from the system is the inbuilt corruption and long paper work involved in the procedures. In the *Sakshar Mahila Samooh* scheme, the budget allocation by the State is minimal only for its sustainability but it supposed to give preference to the SMSs to draw funds from various departments by treating the *Sakshar Mahila Samoohs* with unique status and as recognized NGOs in the State, still the SMS members countered with corruption

and discouraging atmosphere while applying for the community empowerment projects like skill development etc.

After becoming the pradhan of the SMS, I applied for a project from women development corporation, Chandigarh for skill development training for the adolescent girls in my village. I received INR. 70,000 for setting up a stitching center along with conducting two batches of tailoring training. The training was successful and there was a demand for beauty culture training as well, so I again applied for the same with an expenditure for one month from the department. I was extremely disappointed and disheartened to know that the official was not willing to pass the project unless I pay them a bribe. I had to withdraw my project and the training could not take place.

(As told by the SMS Pradhan, Vill. Jhanj Khurd)

Official from WCD comes and takes our documented photographs of the activities and never returns.

(Discussion with the SMS Members, Village Patti Kaliyana)

We had applied for project to set up village counseling centers, under a fund initiated by DWCD. Through reliable sources we came to know that our file has been deliberately withdrawn from being considered by the selection committee. Upon this, we decided to meet the district collector, Jind. We also organized a demonstration at the District Collector's office and ultimately, it came under the notice of the Additional District Collector. The Pradhan was called for the clarification. Upon the enquiry it was confirmed that one of the officials had deliberately held the file in order to create a better chance for other local NGOs which had bribed them for receiving the grants money.

(Discussion with the SMS, Village, Amerheri, District- Jind)

It is unfortunate for the State to have a staff force that are not sensible enough and rather corrupt. This is a reflection of the state's failure in addressing women's issues. This rather calls for a proactive participation by the civil society organization and the activists working to empower women. It shows only the tip of the ice-berg of pro-patriarchal society which is suppressing the women to even avail what she is entitled for.

h) Lack of ownership of the Project

The convergence of different department is a worthy initiative but it seems that there is no exclusive oversight to the scheme due to which it has suffered in its implementation at the grassroot level. There is a lack of ownership within the scheme and the officers, with already existing multiple responsibilities, are given additional tasks to supervise. The study shows that although the scheme was initiated by DWCD, it was not utilized and channeled well at the community level for its smooth implementation.

The study finds that the lack of technical support and follow-up resulted in damaged and jamming of the sanitary napkin machines that were funded by the Women Development Corporation with technical support from the Department of Health. The members who had received trainings also could not continue due to the higher costs of the sanitary napkin and lack of marketing opportunities. The project was started in convergence with the health department but did not achieve the desired success due to discrepancies in the roles assigned and lack of ownership.

i) Lack of support in maintaining documentation, project writing and fund raising.

The study notes that during the focused discussions with the SMS members, almost 70 percent of the SMS members were aware that the SMS is an NGO and is a registered organization. But their understanding of an organization was not clear. They were not aware about the scope and the role of a non-governmental organization in civil society action. The members were also taking initiative to understand and learn the organizational activities and processes but that was limited to only a very few members. In all the sampled SMSs, it was found that they had maintained some level of documentation like activity file, photographs of the activities, detailed reports, press and media coverage clippings, registration certificate, bank passbook, financial records of the activities and audit reports and financial statements etc. The training given to the members were limited to perform within the area of activities that are regularly performed.

j) Lack of technical training is impeding in bringing out the potentials of rural women-

The women are very keen to strengthen the SMS activities through some regular funds generation, but they remain incapable due to lack of attention given to them. There is no internal evaluation report of the scheme available with the Department of Women and Child Development, Haryana.

The SMS members, in the sampled SMS, have raised funds from the Department of Education, Forest Department, Department of Youth Affairs, Department of Power etc, but still could not develop a long term association due to lack of continuous technical support.

k) Lack of skill based and sensitization/awareness trainings

The leaders shared that they faced challenges in talking about issues like family planning, HIV/AIDS, contraception, mental health. Even for the leaders, it was important to open up and initiate the talks on such issues. During the discussion with the SMS members, it was found that in each *samooh*, trainings are imparted through two channels. Generating awareness on gender sensitization, legal literacy, government programs and schemes etc. are given by organizing formal trainings by the Department of Women and Child Development and Department of Health and few other Departments. The formal trainings are imparted to a few selected members in each SMS group and further these trained members have given training to the rest of the group members. Training is considered as one of the important factors in bringing change in the behavior towards an issue. The strategy of training the selected members in each group is a worthy step towards ensuring its impact but these training, feedback, behavior change and other skilled-based trainings should take place frequently in order to maximize its impact to indicate a positive change in the community.

SUGGESTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

It is a known fact that non-governmental organizations have to go through a number of problems like lack of funds, project oriented work rather than vision oriented work to survive, high turnover rate, lack of credible work etc. The SMSs in Haryana are the innovative and tailored-made NGOs that are working at the community/village level. It's innovative for its legal entity, ownership and belongingness to the work for one's own community, flexibility, ability to take up the issues that are locally relevant. The women working as members in SMS are from the same village, volunteering for their

community development. The SMSs take up predominantly gender issues that are few of the main issues in Haryana. The State's initiative to register such a large number of SMSs in each village of Haryana is a unique initiative but it still has a profound and wide scope of intervention by various stakeholders like government, private and public institutions, communities and activists etc. to mark the SMS as a successful initiative. The suggestions and recommendations that the researcher would like to give on the basis of findings are:-

At Macro Level

1. It is reasonable that State cannot take the entire responsibility to empower all the SMSs as it is a non-governmental entity but the nodal department particularly the Department of Women and Child Development may be entrusted the responsibility to identify the active SMSs at district/block level so that further support may be extended in terms of acquirement of funds, implementation of community programs and schemes and other related support.
2. The convergence with different state departments to facilitate SMSs with funds to work with issues related to women and other community services should be more effective by allocating separate budget for NGOs and special preference should be give to the SMSs. This way, the State can strengthen the roots of the SMSs so that they may have rich experience of functioning and executing various duties and roles as NGOs. It is also important because SMS membership belong to the rural women who may have less exposure of working as members and may not have any experience of working as employees.
3. The SMS works through participation of volunteers from the community. The spirit of volunteerism should be high for a sustainable work. The Government should provide continuous honorarium to each SMS for its recognition in the

community and to ensure that they make sustained efforts for which they have been formed.

4. The nodal department should also give special attention to the SMS as scheme for women 'empowerment'. The replacement of SMS into other schemes of women development dissolves its special quality as state-led NGO and developing it not as a beneficiary scheme but as an indigenous resource generation scheme for gender equity and development.

At Mezzo Level

5. The SMSs are working specifically in the rural community especially in the villages. The SMS members should be trained in the area of community development like using various participatory approaches to reach out to the vulnerable members of the community, participation in public forums, social audits, gender budgeting etc. to their capacities to work as volunteers under the increasing SMS.
6. The SMSs can have very important role in seeking accountability from panchayat at village level and block level. In this study, it was also found that the SMSs are playing a proactive role in the community development activities like the construction of roads, public buildings, enrolment of the beneficiaries under schemes like employment schemes, sanitation and schemes related to health. Still, a lot of oversight functions can be done by SMSs as they are seen as a social capital in the community.
7. The SMSs can be directed to seek funds from the village panchayats for the activities like organizing rallies, health awareness, awareness generation on schemes and programs etc.

8. The SMS enrolls only literate and educated rural women volunteers. Some of the volunteers are educated and possess diplomas, UG and PG degrees as well. These are rich human resources available within the village. Selected members from each SMS should be ensured master trainers training in fields about the issues like gender based violence, HIV/AIDS, Family counseling, child protection etc. Such rich resources at rural community level may have manifold benefits like these women can train other members of SMS and can work as resource persons for other organizations working at the grass-root level. This will also ensure human resource enriched SMSs and will have even deeper impact in the community.
9. The SMSs are rural women organization and lack skills in fund raising and management. Along with capacity building, these women-based organizations should be given continuous minimum funds so that the village activities like monthly meetings, awareness programs, small level interventions like addressing the community cases, addressing health issues of women and adolescents etc. should not be hampered due to non-availability of funds. When there is continuity of activities in the community, the people of that community become active and seek support and respond to these programs as well. But in case such activities are paused due to any reasons like lack of funds, the participation is withdrawn slowly.
10. Capacity building of SMS can also be done by linking in various relevant departments like Social Work, Women Studies, Management etc. that are vibrantly existing in different State Universities of Haryana. In the study, it was also found that the study material and other IEC materials and training of select SMS leaders were done by the Department of Women Studies, Kurukshetra University. Such capacity building programs can be organized for the SMSs

situated in the vicinity of each university so that it can be further linked to action research and university social interface.

11. *Sakshar Mahila Samooh* as the name says is the all women organization. But the objectives of women development and 'empowerment' cannot be achieved alone by single gender and therefore, it requires participation from both the genders. So, it should allow the participation of male volunteers from the community at an official level to intervene into the issues like gender sensitization and working with youth.
12. The nodal department and other relevant department's officials should also be trained and sensitized to work with such community-based women's group. Such trainings should be provided to officials at all levels.

At Micro Level

13. Strengthening the internal functioning of the SMS like monthly meetings and ensuring participation of each member, encouraging members for taking independent initiatives in the community, resolving internal dynamics or healthy growth of the SMS as a social capital is very important. Also, evolution of leadership and team spirit should be ensured through timely intervention by the officials from the nodal department.
14. Exclusive technical training like use of computers and multimedia to strengthen the documentation and report writing can help the SMSs in Haryana to emerge as strong community-based organizations.
15. Facilitation for networking of SMSs in Haryana to support each other in terms of hand holding, campaigning, providing trainings, extension of activities, is required. In the study it was also observed that the SMSs were reaching out to neighboring villages and were conducting activities through networking with

other SMSs. But such networks were of short term nature and it got dissolved after the completion of certain activity. Such networks should sustain for long term benefits like addressing more serious issues like alcoholism, violence against women etc.

16. Networking with other reputed national and international NGOs can accelerate the growth of these community-based SMSs. SMSs can aptly put through the roles and responsibilities entrusted to them as there is transparency among members and they don't work for vested interest. Also, there are many NGOs that are interested to work in the State unfortunately , they are not able to reach out to districts and their concentration remains only in few geographical areas due to lack of credible NGOs in Haryana. Here the State can play a proactive role by promoting selected SMSs in each district to work with these donor NGOs.
17. The SMSs activities and interventions should be taken up for research to study its impact in the community, its relations with the community especially with poor and vulnerable groups . Such study can help to develop further interventions by the SMSs.
18. Selected officials that are directly dealing with SMSs should be trained to facilitate as resource persons so that their interventions may help in the smooth functioning of these SMSs.
19. Through SMS intervention other economic programs can be implemented successfully like Self-Help Groups, livelihood programs, programs to address unemployment and promotion of skill-based programs etc. In the study it was also discovered that the SMSs were instrumental in forming sustainable SHGs as these SMSs were able to reach out to women from socially and economically poor background. Regular meetings with the SHGs were helpful in their

sustainability. However, due to lack of guidance and support system, the SMS interventions were limited to micro-finance only. If the SMSs will be given technical support and projects, they can create successful entrepreneurship programs too.

The State Government conceptualized the SMSs to address the State's two most pivotal issues. The first one was poor social status of women and second was lack of participation of civil society organizations and credible organization. Therefore, the initiative of the State to register these SMSs as village NGOs is a welcoming move. Only increasing the number of organizations on paper will not resolve the issue unless exclusive support system in terms of separate monitoring machinery to upscale in terms of quality and output is provided. It is significant to state here that the State of Haryana is economically rich and can afford a separate machinery to promote these SMSs for their intervention in rural areas as seventy percent of the State's population resides in rural areas. Lack of credible NGOs in rural areas is causing poor implementation of government schemes and programs and this fact has resulted in continuation of age old social malpractices like infanticide, honor killing, caste -based and gender-based discrimination, violence against women, poor health indicators to pinpoint a few. The active presence of SMS in villages can actually transform the situation of rural Haryana.