



TRANSFORMING THE SELF, TRANSFORMING THE FAMILY

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For various reasons and purposes, people form organizations. Some groupings are shortlived, with the members coming together only until after the achievement of a definite objective. Some others are more durable and their goals more encompassing to accomodate the satisfaction of their members' varied needs.

In particular, women in the Philippines are increasingly organizing or being organized into various groups. This may be into more formal groupings such as cooperatives or informally into socio-civic-economic groups. Funding from various sources has also been made increasingly available for their activities, especially livelihood projects.

Yet these organizations have focused their attention only on the individual woman, and have sought to improve her life and status, without considering the consequences for those around her. Any effect on the woman will necessarily reflect on those about her. Since the woman's main concern is her family, it is undoubtedly the family which will experience and reflect any change in her. Therefore, changing the woman will change the family.

THE CONCEPT OF EMPOWERMENT

Defining empowerment is a difficult task since it is both process and goal. As a process, it is dynamic and can be measured only in qualitative terms. As a goal, indicators can be established to measure it in quantitative terms.

It is also of various types. Thus, one can aspire for empowerment in the social, economic or political realms, to name only a few. However, it is the thesis of this paper that true empowerment must begin from within the person (a psychological empowerment) but that it can be (and at times, must be) kindled by external forces.

Empowerment, in this paper, is defined to mean having relative control over one's life and behaviors, including making decisions for oneself, moving from being a passive object to an active agent in one's environment.

In this sense, the empowered woman is one who assumes responsibility for her life, sets her own directions and is free to make her own choices and decisions, although this is always in relation to and in consideration of others. She awakens to her many possibilities and sets about developing these. At the same time, she realizes a relatedness and responsibility to others.

The empowered family is one that has its members fully functioning to the best of their abilities. They are able to cope with difficulties on their own and with minimal dependence on outside agencies. As a unit, it is stable, productive and responsive to the needs of others.

Empowerment can occur at various levels - the individual, group, community and societal levels. However, the larger changes build upon changes at the bottom and the society is empowered, only to the extent that the individuals who compose it are themselves empowered.

Thus, an empowered society is one whose members participate actively in its affairs, aware of their rights and responsibilities. It provides opportunities for the growth and development for all sectors and supports its members in their productive efforts.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK FOR THE PAPER:

Women come together in self help groups and engage in livelihood activities to achieve a better quality of life for their families. In the process, they acquire experiences and assume a new and more active role which affects the way they perceive themselves. In turn, this affects their behaviors towards and within the family and the community. Thus, the women

are changed and transformed to take on a self reliant, more active and directive role.

Such changes may occur as a result of two factors: the organization itself, its programs and the various activities it offers its members and the experience of success and accomplishment in a livelihood project of the organization.

Bringing together and linking women who had led previously isolated lives into a regular group with a definite purpose, helping them acquire badly needed skills begins a process which may not be foreseen by the agent. Enabling them to achieve some measure of economic success results in a better sense and image of self as well as in new behaviors more congruent with this.

If these changes are perceived positively by the individual and attributed to the organization, participation and affiliation will be valued. This will result in greater involvement which produces still greater changes.

But change comes not only because of the organization but also because of economic success in a livelihood activity provided by the group.

Change can begin in any aspect of life. However, the economic is the most effective and the easiest starting point. From a previously dependent and reactive position, the person begins to affect and improve the family's condition. This sense of competence then generalizes to other aspects of the person, building a sense of personal power, efficacy and worth to produce affirmative behaviors which impact on the environment.

Economic success builds self confidence. In turn, this facilitates the acquisition of social skills which enable the person to make her way with greater ease. Since there is no longer any worry regarding the family's financial condition, there is a greater openness to others, and a concern which moves beyond the family to the larger environment in which the family is situated.

Thus, attempting to bring about change can most easily occur through the economic route. The sense of being an effective agent will pervade all other aspects of the person, shaping attitudes and affecting behaviors. These in turn will act upon others in the external environment and feedback to the person, thereby maintaining the new attitudes and behaviors.

Thus, empowerment begins with the person but does not end there. The empowered individual begins to change others - albeit unknowingly - through his/her new behaviors and attitudes. The transformed individual then becomes a transforming agent in and for his/her environment.

Usually, the first to realize and to react to this change is the family. While the reactions are not always positive since some members may resist and even counter the changes in the other, more often than not, and especially if the changed individual is crucial to family life and dynamics, change will take place, slowly, inevitably - with the changed behaviors reflecting the greater inner changes.

There is no one more crucial to the family system, especially in the Philippines, than the mother. At the core of the unit, she holds the group together and exerts the greatest influence on its members. Thus, if the family as a whole is to change, a change in the attitudes and behaviors of the mother would have to take place.

Eventually, both the woman and/or the family will begin to impact on their immediate neighborhood through increased involvement in community affairs and/or simply by serving as role models for the rest.

Thus, empowering the family must begin by empowering the woman at the center of the unit. And the woman can be changed by participating in a supportive group which offers her the economic opportunity to help her family.

PARTICIPANTS IN THIS STUDY:

Working along this line of reasoning, a study was done to see what the woman's involvement in an organization with livelihood projects would accomplish. It was suspected that helping the woman attain some measure of economic success will result in various changes in the home and family. More subtle but quite profound and long-lasting changes within the woman, her attitudes and outlook were also thought to follow. The economic entry point was chosen since Filipino women are inclined towards small scale entrepreneurial activities. They are expected by culture to keep the family finances and to manage its resources, all the while deferring to the husband as the main provider.

The Kababaihang Barangay of San Miguel Bulacan (KBB or the Village Women of San Miguel Bulacan) was the focus of this study. It is a rural women's organization which draws most, if not all, of its members from the lower income groups in the forty-seven (47) barangays of the town of San Miguel Bulacan in the Philippines. Specializing in livelihood projects and activities

such as swine dispersal (breeding and fattening) and subcontracting labor for knitting children's sweaters, garment sewing and stuffed toy making for export among others, it enables its members to earn a second supplementary income for their families.

It is a loose aggrupation, and is open to all women in the town aged twenty-two and above, thereby making it difficult to determine exact membership figures. However, the various chairpersons calculate that they can depend on about twenty-five to thirty-five women in each barangay (village). The requirements for membership are flexible, with all the women above twenty-two years considered part of the group. However, one is an active member only if one participates in at least one activity or meeting of the group. Otherwise, one is classified as an inactive member.

THE PROFILE OF THE KBB MEMBER

The typical KBB member is a married woman, between the ages of thirty to fifty, although more usually between thirty to forty, with two to six children, the average being four. She is a Catholic and would have completed an elementary education (until grade 6). More often than not, she is a housewife, although she may occasionally accept work in exchange for cash (taking in

laundry, hiring out as an agricultural worker, etc.) She may also operate a tiny sari-sari (variety store) within the premises of her house or yard, selling packets of shampoo, coffee, candies and biscuits, together with a few other essentials.

Her husband is usually a farmer, although he does not own the land he works on. Quite often, he is an agricultural laborer. As a family, they subsist on a little less than P3,000 (roughly about \$111.00 using an exchange rate of \$1 to P27) a month, although more usually, the figures would be between P5,000-P10,000 a year (roughly \$185-370.00). (It should be kept in mind that these figures are a rough approximation since their income is not always in cash but in terms of cavans of palay which are earned at specific points in the agricultural cycle rather than on a regular monthly basis.)

To augment the family income, the husband works at other jobs, especially during the agricultural off-season. He tries his hand at carpentry work, driving a tricycle or any other work which brings in a few pesos. Because of their need, the woman welcomes any opportunity which would translate into money. It is because of this that she joined the KBB, although she waited to see whether membership would really bring tangible results.

In choosing a livelihood activity, she opts for one she could do at home, since many of her children are too young to be left alone. So swine breeding/fattening is greatly favored, along with knitting since both are home-based. In the pig project, especially, no special skill is required and not much time is taken from the daily routine of cooking, cleaning, doing the laundry and caring for the children.

She credits her family, especially the husband, and to a lesser extent, the older children, as being of great help, thus highlighting the role of the family in her organizational and livelihood involvement.

METHODS EMPLOYED IN THE STUDY:

A multi-method approach was used for the study. This approach was considered best, based on the belief that not one method is sufficient to study a problem in all its varied aspects. Thus, a strategy employing different tools to investigate a problem from several perspectives and the discovery of a data convergence from these different but complementary methods creates greater confidence in the results. The following methods were therefore used over an almost year-long study period:

1. In-depth Interview/Use of key informants
2. Observation

3. Participant Observation
4. Documents Analysis
5. Survey Questionnaire
6. Content Analysis
7. Informal group discussions

A BRIEF LOOK AT THE LIVELIHOOD ACTIVITIES OF THE KBB

Various livelihood activities were made available to the women by the organization. Three of these will be briefly described here.

In the swine dispersal project, the women were given pigs on a loan basis, with the understanding that this was to be paid with two piglets from the first litter. In turn, these piglets were given to other women to start off their own projects. Upon repayment of the loan, all proceeds from the sale of the other piglets and all subsequent litters were used by the women for their family's needs. However, there was the understanding that part of the proceeds were to be set aside to capitalize another small business, thus providing still another income source for the family. The swine fattening project included a forced savings component to enforce this emphasis.

The women evolved the method of "each-one-teach-one" as a result of their experiences in the knitting project so that each woman who acquired the skill was to teach another woman the same skill and in turn, this second woman was also to teach another, until eventually, everyone would have acquired another useful skill. Along the way, everyone in the women's families learned how to knit, particularly the children who, they discovered, did not even have to be directly taught. They had learned the skill simply by watching the others as they worked.

Still another project involved giving the people fruit tree seedlings and vegetable seeds for planting in their backyards thus enabling them to be partially self sufficient in their food needs, at the same time obtaining an income from the sale of any surplus. A part of the project involved teaching the people how to plant and care for the trees and vegetables properly as well as candy and sweets making along with fruit preservation. In the process, the people acquired a greater appreciation for the environment.

All the organization's livelihood projects encouraged the women to develop useful skills and to utilize these fully in helping to provide for their families. Whatever earnings they had were used in subsidizing their family's daily needs, the children's education, the purchase of household items, the remodelling and/or expansion of their homes and even, in some

cases, the purchase of a tricycle which the husband could use for extra income. Since the organization's intent was also to help them become economically self reliant, they were actively encouraged to save enough to fund a small business and thus acquire another income source. In this way, the family was assured of a small but regular income, the presence of two income earners and several income sources, thus rendering them less economically vulnerable.

THE IMPORTANCE OF A SUPPORTIVE FAMILY

The family is the primary and initial motivating factor for the woman's involvement with the organization and its projects. It is also the family which enabled the woman to become more actively involved with the organization and to be successful at her livelihood project by taking over a large part of her domestic responsibilities and by involving themselves in the project.

For instance, because the husband and/or the children took over many of the tasks she had previously done such as cooking, cleaning and caring for the younger children, she could leave the house early in the morning to attend group meetings and to come home late at night from these, without having to worry about the well-being of the family. It was also because of this same family support that she was able to spend time on her knitting

The women credited the activities for the changes that these brought to the family, to their relationship with their husbands and in themselves.

Their families had drawn closer together and were more cooperative as the various members began spending more time at home and with each other, attending to the chores and ensuring that the women's livelihood project was successful. The children took on more tasks such as cooking simple meals, tending younger siblings, keeping watch over the house and in the case of older daughters, doing the laundry. All these they did sooner than they would be expected to by society. They learned to knit and to take care of the pigs. Helping to earn the money, they developed a greater respect for it. There were many times when the family gathered together over a sweater pattern, talking over the day's activities.

The husbands became more adept at doing tasks which were formerly done by the women. They were involved in most of the livelihood projects of their wives and also learned a lot of valuable skills such as caring for the pigs and knitting. However, this last activity was usually done indoors, and away from the sight of the other men in the barangay.

and to finish more pieces with their active help (this activity paid on a piece rate basis) as well as to raise fat and healthy pigs for market sale.

The women were lavish with their praise for their husbands' very understanding and supportive attitude. It was their husbands in fact who encouraged them to become more active in the group (as a result of the positive changes they saw in the women and because of the returns from the projects). These men brought their wives to their meetings in the tricycle at times, because of the distance involved and the difficulty of transportation, and were always ready to listen to their stories and experiences when the women came home from a meeting or group activity. In fact, the men noted that their marriages had been renewed, and were stronger and more vital since the women became more active and involved in matters outside of the home.

The men took on more of the household tasks to help their wives. They cleaned, cooked and cared for the children. But this state of affairs was not discussed beforehand by the couples. The husbands simply did what they could since the women needed to earn money for the family.

They also began to help in the projects. The males built the pigpens and took to coming home earlier in the day to clean these

pens and to bathe the animals. They learned to knit and did so when there were rush orders to fill. (However, the men did only the simpler parts such as the back and the sleeves, leaving the more complicated front for their women and children.)

The children were given more domestic tasks and were gradually drawn into helping out in the livelihood activities. Since their school allowance depended on a good sale price for the pigs, they took on the task of feeding the animals. They learned to knit and helped to finish more pieces after school hours and during their vacations (In fact, several of the better and faster knitters were young children and they contributed substantially to the weekly income.) There were even cases where the children were included in the decision-making regarding expenditures since the family income was truly the result of the efforts of each family member.

THE BENEFITS FROM THE LIVELIHOOD ACTIVITIES

The income from their livelihood projects provided the families with a steady source of funds for their daily expenses. Far from being the supplementary income envisioned by the organization, in many of the cases, the women's income became the primary and regular source of funds for the family.

Thus, the men did the household tasks and the women provided financially for their families - a virtual role reversal for the couple, although they seemed unaware of this. Asked about this situation, the men replied that it was something they did to help out their wives and redounded to the family's benefit anyway while the women maintained that the men remained the heads of their families.

Even in decision-making, the women assumed more power as they acquired a greater say in the disposition of the family finances. This situation differed greatly from the past when only the men decided how the money was to be spent. At present, both the husband and wife discussed the matter and decided what was to be done. Probing the matter more closely, it was found that in many cases, the men left it to the women to decide or that the women had already made a decision but nevertheless referred it to the male. It was rare in such cases for the male to dispute the woman's decision. Thus, from a previously powerless position vis-a-vis the husband, the women had become power-sharers in their families.

They became more comfortable with delegating tasks and in drawing the other members into their activities so that everyone was involved and had a share in all matters that concerned the family. Thus, the women's activities became the family's activities.

But the women were especially vocal regarding the changes they (and/or others) had noticed in themselves. These changes included the following:

1. THE ACQUISITION OF NEW SKILLS -

Many of the women had barely completed an elementary school education and were very conscious of this fact. Marrying early, they failed to develop many other commercial skills. Beginning from zero knowledge for many of the livelihood projects, through determination and need, they learned to sew, knit, take care of livestock, especially pigs and to minister to minor ailments in these animals, among others.

2. ACQUISITION OF COGNITIVE SKILLS -

Balancing the many demands on their time, the women learned how to schedule and to prioritize their activities. They made their own decisions and had confidence in the soundness of these. They acquired greater flexibility and adaptability as they strove to accomplish their many responsibilities, feeling less guilt for tasks set aside for later accomplishment or delegated to another.

In the past, they said, they tried to do everything at once and by themselves. They pushed themselves hard as they sought to prove that they could cope with the household chores at the same time as their organizational and livelihood activities. Painfully

conscious of their lack of education, they accepted their husbands' decisions, even when these dealt with household matters. They deferred to them at all times and for all things.

3. ACQUISITION OF SOCIAL SKILLS AND CONFIDENCE -

As a result of their organizational involvement, they acquired a wider circle of friends and soon learned to mix and to deal with a wide variety of personalities. Helped along by their experiences and learnings from the seminars and exposure trips of the group, they moved beyond their small barangays and saw places and met people they would never have been able to in the past. Other women began asking their advice and opinion regarding their livelihood activities and they realized that what they had to say was listened to with respect and their advice usually taken. Emboldened, they began to reach out to others, or at the least, to respond, to the overtures of others.

In the past, they would never have dared venture beyond the confines of their barangay and they visited the town proper, only as far as the market place. Now, to their amazement, they found themselves making frequent trips beyond the barangay to the town and even outside their province. They had avoided strangers and were comfortable only with the people in their barangays. Now, they found they could discuss a variety of topics sensibly and with virtually anyone, no longer held back by self consciousness regarding their poverty and lack of education.

They even began to look and dress better, aware that they were regarded as the organization's representatives in their areas. But this more improved appearance reflected a profound inner change - the women had begun to feel better about themselves and had acquired a better self image so that they sought a better fit between this new inner image with their external self.

Within their communities, they began to attend the various assemblies that were held and to take charge of several activities, on behalf of the group. Working together with the others, they began to initiate projects to help others such as a day care center or a small revolving fund for loans. From a previously powerless and inferior position, they found themselves regarded as a potent political force, not only in their barangays but in the entire province.

CONCLUSIONS

Changes had undoubtedly occurred in the women and through the women in their families and even in the communities that they lived. Such changes were confirmed and attested to by the women themselves as well as by others. But were these changes real and substantial? Could they be regarded as empowering?

If empowerment is taken to mean self direction and control which emerges from a strong sense of self, then the changes articulated by the women and attested to by those about them (their families, neighbors, friends) were empowering. And as a result of these changes in the women, changes also occurred in those closest to them - their families.

These families were empowered as their family life and dynamics was made stronger and closer. The nature of their relationships became more cooperative and concerned about the other as they took over tasks previously left to others. If the mother in the past had held the family together, their families had come closer because each member now had a definite and contributive role to play in its maintenance. The families had become more stable (both economically and in terms of the marital relationship). The various family members had acquired skills which they now sought to use as they explored other sources of income.

From the woman at the center of the family to the various family members and from the family to their community, changes had become apparent which were far-reaching and substantial. In providing this group of rural women an organization and livelihood activities, the organizers little realized the effects on the families of these women and beyond.