

CASE STUDY

Conducted under the Project

“Mutually reinforcing the role of women in habitat based livelihood services”

– Researching the Case of India

Darshna Mahila Kalyan Samiti (DMKS)



Keywords: Employment Opportunities, Alternative Livelihoods

FACTS

Context

The Darshna Mahila Kalyan Samiti (DMKS) is a grassroots organization working toward the benefit of women mainly through Self Help Groups and health-related projects in Madhya Pradesh (MP), India. The organization has six branch offices with the main office at Chattarpur in MP. While working with the women at the grassroots level, they realised the need to create an alternative source of livelihood for them in the area. Thus, they started a training programme in *Bamari* village in Chattarpur district for master masons in 2006, under the Poorest Area Civil Society Programme (PACs). Simultaneously, they also mobilized women in the village to take up training in constructing habitat products such as roofing tiles, fencing poles, and cement pots.

Objectives

The objective DMKS behind this initiative was to provide the women with an alternative source of livelihood, other than that of agricultural labour. Agriculture labour was seasonal and could hardly meet their basic needs. The work has been set up to give them a regular income throughout the year.

Scale

Currently, the organization is functioning at a small scale. It trained 15 women in the beginning, and presently six are regular employees. When the work pressure increases, more trained women are employed from the village. The present centre – *Mahila Shakti Cement Udyog* – is built near *Bamitha* town, which has all the basic facilities (including a well for continuous supply of water).

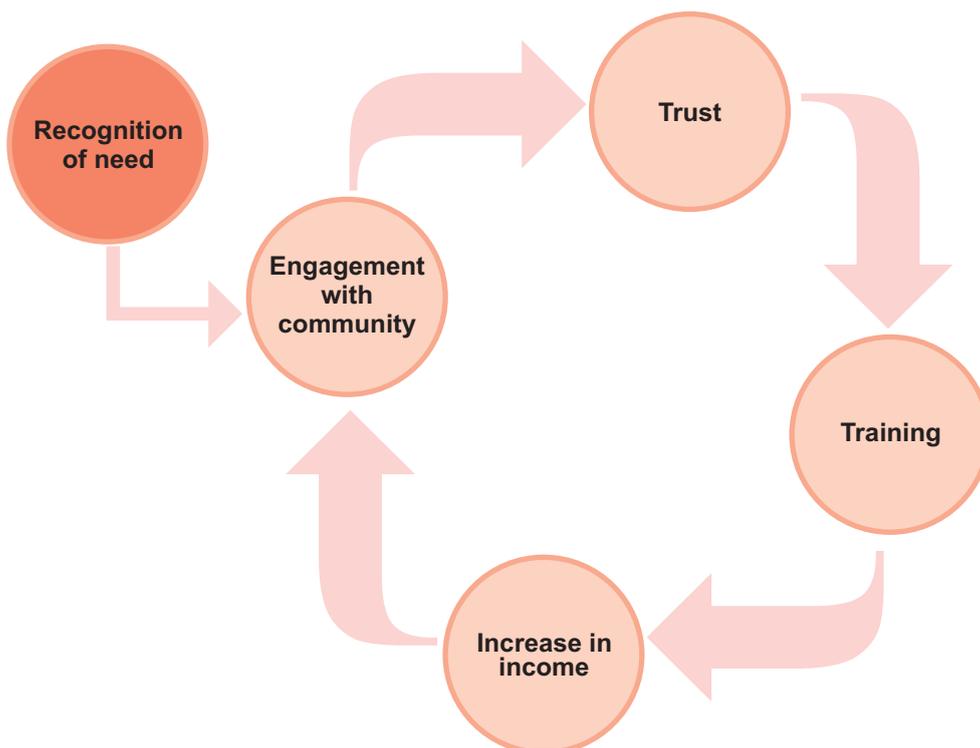
The land, on which the centre is built, is in the name of the centre/group and the organization plans to expand the work of the women, not only in terms of different products but also in terms of the quantity of the same products.

Poorest Area Civil Society Programme (PACs)

The Poorest Areas Civil Society (PACS) Programme is the flagship initiative of the Department for International Development (DFID), Government of United Kingdom, in partnership with civil society in India to help women and socially excluded communities to claim their rights and entitlements. The programme aims at correcting exclusion by advocating for a more socially inclusive environment.

<www.empowerpoor.org>

Diagram 1: Cyclical representation of DMKS approach



FEATURES

Innovative approaches

DMKS has established a stable system for fund management. In the year 2007, the DPIIP sanctioned Rs 10,000 to the women working in habitat services with DMKS to initiate a revolving fund for the group. This fund aids the organization in sourcing and buying raw materials. The profit made from the sale of the final products is put back in the fund after paying the women. This system has minimized dependence on outside sources for raw materials, leading to self-sustainability of the group.

Even for mobilizing women, a different approach was put in place. To begin with, the organization established trust of the community through PACS. As mentioned, under the PACS programme a training centre was established in *Bamari* village, where master masons were trained. During this training programme, the villagers, out of curiosity, would visit the centre and see the kind of work undertaking. As the project employees went from door-to-door encouraging the women to visit the centre, they also started taking interest in the work. Thus, through this training, they could highlight the kind of work they would teach them. This established trust among the villagers. An added advantage was that many of the women's husbands were being trained under the PACS programme, and thus they did not create hindrance in the training of the women. The organization also ensured that the poorest of the poor women were being trained.

The women started handling the product sales of the enterprise. DMKS does not act as controllers of the process (making women mere workers), but rather have taken a supporting/facilitating role. Only one person (Mr Ramesh Pal) who works under other projects of the organization comes to the centre to provide help and support in procurement of material and arrangement of sales, which is through an outlet at the centre itself.

DMKS highlights their work by constructing a building using the technology they share in the trainings. In addition, the roof of the big room in the centre is constructed of the roofing tiles made by the women.

Skill enhancement

These women were trained in Bamari on habitat-related products like, cement jaali, cement beams, roof tiles, water troughs (for storing drinking water for animals), cement pots, fencing poles etc. In this centre, they are presently involved in making the following products:

- roofing tiles
- fencing poles
- cement pots

The training was held for a month in their village, and the women were taught to make these products from the scratch. They were taught basic construction tasks such as mixing and measurements, then going on to training in machine usage (that were used for the roofing tiles) and the moulds (which were used for the pots). They were also taught how to make the frames for the cement poles, using iron rods and thick iron wires.

Work environment

As mentioned earlier, initially the women were trained in a centre, which was in their village.

District Poverty Initiatives Project (DPIP)

The District Poverty Initiatives Project (DPIP) is an ambitious project of the Government of Madhya Pradesh for the alleviating poverty in the state. The state government is committed to bring about reforms in governance and social services for the poor and the vulnerable. The project, on its part, has been complementing this objective by promoting decentralization and a more effective demand-based approach for poverty alleviation.

Product rates

Roofing tiles	: ₹ 12/ piece
Cement pots	
Small	: ₹ 50
Medium	: ₹ 60
Large	: ₹ 70
Fencing poles	
6 feet	: ₹ 180
7 feet	: ₹ 190

Mapping of the women's work day

5:00 a.m.	:	Wake up
5. 15 a.m. to 8.30 a.m.	:	Domestic work (Cooking, cleaning, bathing)
8.30 a.m. to 9 a.m.	:	Travel to work
9:00 a.m. to 10.00 a.m.	:	Clean up of Centre
10:00 a.m. to 12:00 noon	:	Work
12 p.m. to 12.30 p.m.	:	Lunch
12.30 p.m. to 4 p.m.	:	Work
4 pm to 5 pm	:	Clean up and go home
5.30 p.m. to 9 p.m.	:	Domestic work
9 p.m.	:	Sleep

However, due to local political problems, where in the panchayats were fighting amongst themselves, another centre was built in *Bamitha* where the women now work. This centre was built with the assistance of the DPIP in 2007/08. The centre is called Mahila Shakti Cement Udyog. Today, at the centre the women work alongside men in the production of the aforementioned habitat material. The men are specifically involved in cement mixing and construction of the fencing poles (which are made only on order). The organization thought that the women would not be able to carry heavy loads. A point worth noting here is that although the women were happy with the support of the men in doing heavy work, they were able to handle this work in their absence as well. However, due to cultural beliefs regarding women doing heavy physical labour, the organization thought it best to employ men alongside for this work.

The centre is just 4 km away from the village. The women can easily commute by foot. The women prefer working in the centre as they can work without the burden of purdah. The centre has a toilet and water facilities. In addition, the women are quite at ease working alongside the men. They have cordial working relationships where both assist each other. Rani, one of the women in this centre clearly stated, “*hum barabar ka kaam karte hain aur ek jaisee gunvatta ka kaam karte hain*”. The supervisor (Ramesh Pal) also reiterated this fact.

The women work for approximately five to six hours in a day, when electricity is available at the centre.

LIVELIHOOD BENEFITS

Through the work in the construction sector, the women benefited tremendously. The following are the major areas in which they benefited.

a. Increase in income

Prior to the training, the women were either working as agricultural labour or were not working at all. These women were barely able to sustain themselves. Here at the centre, they are able to earn ₹ 100 per day and normally can get work for an entire month. The payments are on weekly basis, but in hours of need, they also get early payments. The income also helps them send their children to school. For example, due to lack of money, one of the women named Rani (age 25 years) had to take her daughter out of school. However, after getting training, with the extra money, she has now put her daughter in a government hostel in a nearby town.

Rani also narrated that earlier when only her husband was working, it was difficult to make two ends meet, but now that even she is earning life is much easier and she is even able to make small savings (*tab kuch bhi bachta nahin tha aur ab khula haath hai*)².

b. Enhancing the bargaining power

Being uneducated and from poor communities, these women initially were unable to handle even basic calculations. Over time, as they have been working in the sector as part of the

How skilled labour in manufacturing Habitat Products changed Mamta's life

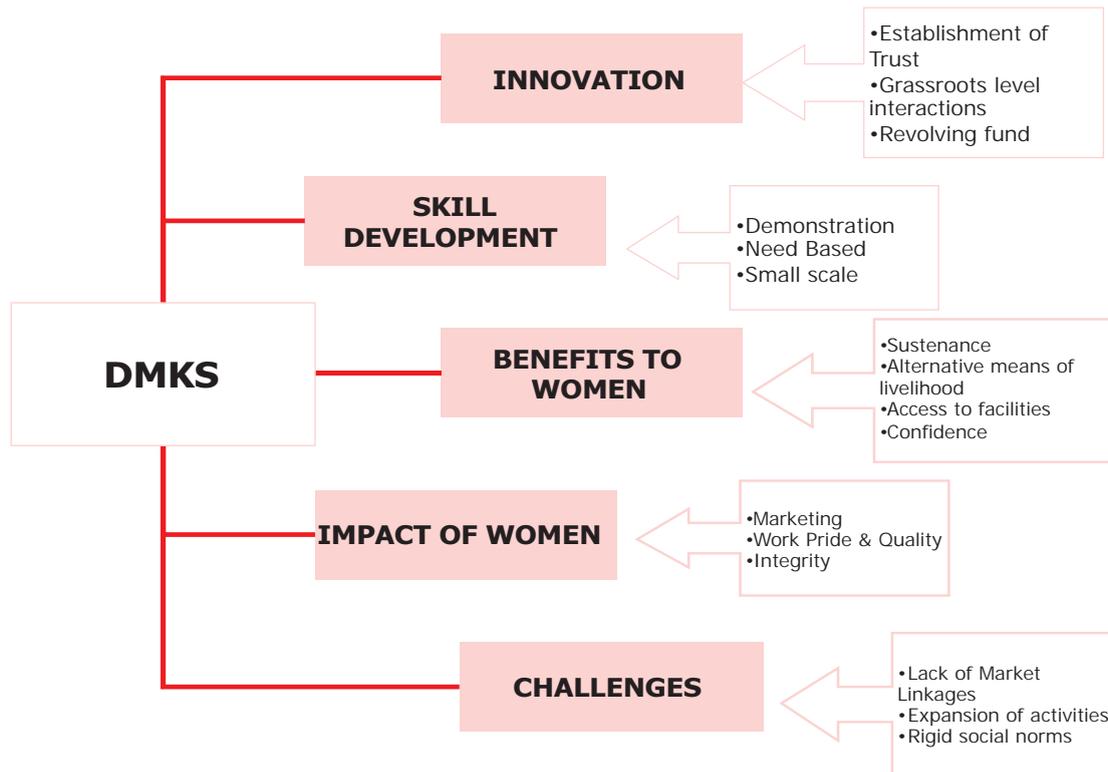
Mamta used to be a homemaker, barely being able to make ends meet. Her husband earned a meager amount working as manual labour in a nearby town. Then through the master masons training under the PACs programme, her husband got training and started earning a better income. Mamta encouraged by this, took up the training for women. Earlier, she hardly had a say in domestic or village matters, lived in a semi-permanent rented house, and could barely afford to send her children to school, especially her daughter. Today, Mamta with her increased income sends her children to private schools and has also arranged for tuitions. They have shifted to a rented accommodation in the Bamitha town. The couple has also been able to buy land worth ₹ 50,000 in the village.

For Mamta, work is like her daily prayer, and she feels empty without a day's work at the centre.



Women making MCR tiles and cement pots

Diagram 2: Thematic analysis of DMKS



DMKS, these women have found their voice. Some of them say, “*hum pehle sara waqt purdah karte the, ab gaon mein sirf bujurgon and paraye mard ke samne katein hain, aur yahan kaam kartein huye toh bilkul nahi kartein*”³. Moreover, they have gained enough confidence to be able to do *hisaab kitaab*⁴ of their incomes easily. In fact, they now take decisions about the household expenses independently without consulting their husbands. They can now confidently bargain with the clients who come to the centre. For instance, one of the women exemplified this clearly by saying, “*Agar woh hamare sar par bandook bhi laga dein toh bhi hum kum daam mein nahin denge, par agar woh samaan badi matra mein le rahen hain toh hum daam kuch kam bhi kar saktein hain*”⁵. The DMKS staff emphasised this point as well, saying, that the women are much more efficient in marketing and selling than their male counterparts. They are extremely aware of the rates and never get fleece even though they are uneducated. In fact, if there is loading of material involved, the women regularly bargain for an extra wage.

c. Ushering in social empowerment

Madhya Pradesh is one of the backward states in India, both economically and socially. The women face many restrictions at the societal level. These adversely affect their voice, especially if they are part of a poor house and a backward or low community. Most of the women working with DMKS were from these communities, and initially had no say in domestic and societal matters.

These women although may seem slow on the empowerment front, have come a long way from what their



Women working on MCR machine and moulds

situations used to be. In addition, in effect, taking the larger cultural and social environment in mind, these women have made a lot of progress, from not having a say to finding a voice, especially in domestic matters. The women who were working in the centre very clearly said that the work makes them happy and they have a keen interest in doing it finding it better than the agricultural work. They are not abused for working here and sometimes even the other women of the village want to be part of such work. Phalibai, one of the women working at the centre said that now that she has found her confidence, she thinks no work is difficult. (*acchhe man se aur khud par vishvas ke saath kaam karo to kuch mushkil nahn hai*⁶)

Thus, although the women belong to socially restrictive backgrounds and do face restrictions, they are slowly and steadily finding ways to come out of these restrictions. For instance, the traditional attire is still a part of their work, but they do not use veil to cover their faces and take care to wear gloves and other safety equipment.

WOMEN'S CAPABILITIES AND ACHIEVEMENTS

Women's interaction with the market has had major impacts on the sector. These women, whose worldview consisted of simply their village, are now able to negotiate with potential buyers in terms. Their confidence even without any formal education is remarkable.

These women show immense pride in their work. They love working in the sector and feel that now their life has a purpose. This, in turn, is reflected in the quality of their work. In fact, the organization also reiterated that it was easier to work with and train women, as they had an inherent interest in the work. In addition, their qualities of concentration and potential to learn were added benefits in the production of materials, which needed high levels of quality – with regard to measurements and finishing. Also, women's per day rate of production is higher, as they do not give in to distractions, which men regularly indulged in, such as gossip and tobacco breaks. The women mentioned that they could easily make up to 200 roofing tiles a day, if there is electricity supply as per the normal routine.

The women can mix the material without any external support. They weigh the ingredients in measured quantities and prepare the appropriate mix for the products. Moreover, they are always enthusiastic about making new products that can increase their incomes and work. They are also more encouraging in involving their peers from the village in similar work. Thus, they use their social connections to bring more women into the fold of habitat services.

CHALLENGES AND RESPONSES



Finished products (MCR tiles) made by women workers

The major challenge that DMKS face is in terms of funding the expansion of activities and in marketing. Both challenges are interrelated.

The products that the group is involved in making are seasonal in nature. For instance, the demand for roofing tiles peaks during the rainy season and thus they are made in large numbers during this period, which enables some women, who are free from agricultural labour, to get involved in the work on a part-time basis. However, during off-season, there are days when the women are not required to work at all, as there are no buyers for the products. According to DMKS staff, the demand of the products peak at certain times of the year, which increases the work pressure only during that season. To tackle this problem, they are planning to expand the women's work portfolio, and train them in other areas as well,

which the women are willing to do. However, funding is posing to be a problem and the organization is still exploring various avenues.

Although, the products made by the women are of higher quality and are more durable, they face competition from baked mud ones (especially for roofing tiles), as these are cheaper. In this regard, the organization constantly has to reiterate the USP of the products to ensure greater market share.

The limited supply of electricity is also one of the major problems that the centre is facing. Electricity supply comes at 12:00 noon and it remains only until 4.30 p.m. The centre is planning to start alternate measures, but finance is a major obstacle.

Another issue that came to limelight was that when the initiative began, it was expected that the women would become completely independent and carry forth the work as an enterprise. However, due to unstable market conditions, this has not happened. Thus, even in this regard a clear market strategy and an increased work portfolio are essential. The women who are working in the centre are confident, happy, and vocal, but they were not open about the idea of running their own enterprise. Rani says, “*ye sab kaam khud apne aap kar payeinge iske liye abhi apne par utna vishvas nahin hai*”. This angle needs a deeper understanding about the whole context, which is a big challenge in itself.

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- 1 We do the same work and of equal quality as the men.
 - 2 Initially there were no savings, now I can spend as I wish.
 - 3 Initially, we would cover our faces all the time, now we only do it in front of the village elders and unknown men, and here where we work, we don not cover our faces at all.
 - 4 Accounting
 - 5 Even if a client tries to bully us, we do not sell for less than the market price. But, if they are buying the products in large quantity, then we are willing to lessen the price.
 - 6 If you work with the right intentions and with self belief, no work is difficult
 - 7 We do not have enough faith in ourselves to run this enterprise alone without the support of the organization.

Development Alternatives

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