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Role of CSR Practices in Fostering Livelihood Generation in Cuttack District, Odisha, India: A Critical Analysis

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ABSTRACT

The study highlights the role of big businesses in empowering rural women through explicit Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) practices. Companies have made the community in the periphery as the most significant external stakeholder. Thus, CSR plays a vital role in community development with special focus on women empowerment through healthcare, education, environment and livelihood promotion through SHG. In this background, the present paper focuses to understand the role of CSR of a Multinational company i.e., IMFA as an example to see the employability and livelihood generation of women in Cuttack district of Odisha and try to explore the implications of CSR activities on sustaining social empowerment. This study is based on primary field data of qualitative research domain with 10 women respondents of peripheral area of the company engaged in SHG and have been selected through purposive sampling technique. The paper broadly reflects how CSR helps women build livelihoods through SHG activities reflecting the economic avenues bringing corresponding social empowerment.

KEYWORDS: CSR, Women's Empowerment, Self Help Groups, Cuttack, Odisha, India

INTRODUCTION

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Corporate Social Responsibility is the obligations of businessmen to pursue those policies, to make those decisions, or to follow those lines of action which are desirable in terms of the objectives and values of our society (Howard R. Bowen, 1953). Corporate Social Responsibility is enclosed about corporations' responsibilities to local communities and broader society. Necessities for CSR have extended through time as societal potentials have changed and they now incorporate a broad range of social, environmental and economic problems (Carroll & Shabana, 2010). Corporations are not only for employment and production of goods & services but also be converted into the social capital, which is essential in community development. Thus, there is a shift in focus from economic to social dimension. CSR have many roles and impacts on community, such as- transfer of technology from international companies to developing countries, environmental protection actions that made together by corporation and communities, the close bond between the corporation and community create sustainable development (Ephraim, et.al, 2015). Corporations contribute its profit to community development programme. Organization creates internal environment that supports CSR in community development which includes increase in gross domestic products of the country, employment creation which promotes community development (Dakare.et.al, 2011).

Corporate social responsibility is the incorporation of companies in their local surroundings. Companies contribute a lot to their local communities through providing jobs, wages, health benefits etc. They employee majority of their employees from the local community. The impact of CSR for community development can be assessed through gender lens and rural women employability in Odisha is under privileged where company-led CSR efforts can empower them (Mahapatra, 2025). Thus, Companies involved in community in many ways, such as- provision of additional vocational training places, assisting environmental charities, recruitment of socially excluded people, provision of child-care facilities for employees, partnerships with communities, sponsoring of local sports and cultural events and donations to charitable activities (Brew, et.al 2015) promote gender equality through empowering women, etc. (Jha & Totala, 2023).

Women are the backbone in our society. For the development society, it's necessary to empower women. Here one question arises what is the real meaning of women's empowerment? Before we know about women empowerment, it's important to recognize why women are disempowered. There are various reasons of women dis-empowerment such as-

Our patriarchal system, religion misinterpretation, lack of education, lack of employment opportunities, wife beating, afraid of the husband, lack of access to mobile phones, obstacles encountered by women in social and medical environment, dowry deaths, sexual harassments, abduction of women and girls are the main hindrances to women empowerment in India (Bullo, 2018; Mishra & Banerjee, 2024). To overcome all these reasons, CSR have taken several initiatives to empower rural women. Empowerment refers giving power and freedom to all women. Women empowerment means women's participation in workforce and women's involvement in SHG. Increase in number of women SHG help improve the employment and self-sufficiency among women. Higher female population but declining women work force participation because the family pressure and patriarchal society (Sivagandhi & Dash, 2017).

Women empowerment as changing relations of authority which coerce women's choices and sovereignty and harmfully distress health and happiness. It is measured through two indexes, first is based on decision making like- decision on own & child's marriage, number of children, child control, own education, household purchase, own medical treatment decision etc., and second is based on women's participation in household expenditures (Baig, et.al, 2020). In women's education and their empowerment Corporate social responsibility plays a major role by introducing various policies such as- provides financial help, provide employable training in IT software and hardware, nursing, tailoring, security, offering vocational training programme by forming self-help groups for women and creating employment opportunities etc (Rani, 2018).

Self-help group plays a crucial role in promoting women's livelihood. The group constituted by the women for livelihood promotion. It provides employment opportunities mostly to the rural women. It enhances the assistance for their families, and the community as an entire through their collective efforts for development. Due to participate in SHG activities there are many positive changes in live of the group members such as- improvement in knowledge, skills and attitude which transmit from one group member to other. It facilitates those with less economic opportunities or deprived to engage in a better activity that provides and assemble their economic requirements in an effective and stable way. Self-help group builds the teamwork between them, unity, enhances the social relationship etc. Hence, the present study highlights the role of big businesses in empowering rural women through explicit corporate social responsibility practices by involving participatory approach of women in economic assistance through SHGs.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The present paper focuses to understand the role of corporate social responsibility of an Indian company i.e., IMFA as an example to see the employability and livelihood generation of women in Cuttack district of Odisha and try to explore the implications of corporate social responsibility activities on transferring social empowerment. In this qualitative study the research design was exploratory research design. Through exploratory design the researcher has tried to explore the field information. The study was based on primary field data of 10 respondents. These ten respondents' women were from the area around IMFA Choudwar, Cuttack who were the members of SHG group and had been selected through purposive sampling technique. The data was collected through semi-structured interviews and observation. The in-depth interview with each respondent was taken with prior consent, a 40-50minutes each. After data collection the study has recognized some themes derived from their lived experiences of the respondents which explains their role of corporate social responsibility to empower rural women by involving indicators such as (1) Gaining respect and self-confidence within family, (2) Enhanced access and quality of life through CSR initiatives, (3) CSR initiatives- settlements and challenges and (4) Women empowerment, social status and gender equality.

FINDINGS

Theme 1: Gaining respect and self-confidence within family

Respondents defined there are a big transformation happening in their personal and societal identity after joining in self-help groups which is supported by CSR. The present study found the women are experiencing independent not only financially but also in decision making in domestic matters, which leads respect towards them. One participant described how she is able to take decisions within the family: *“Due to CSR, I am capable to earn some money. I am cultivating mushroom and making agarbati, through which am able to help my husband with the money, due to which the house is running smoothly, my husband also asks me before taking any decision what is right and what is wrong”* (P-1, age 33). In contemporary society, financial independence of women and decision-making power of women is increasing day by day because now they are capable to challenge the traditional pattern of dependency, like-dependent on father, brother, husband etc. Financial independence leads to personal and social empowerment of women (Choudhary & Ray, 2024).

The IMFA company help them to farming honey, making phenyl, running a chicken farm, cultivating mushrooms etc. They gave training and provided raw materials like-seeds, fertilizers, strainer, baskets etc, as a result they earn some money which enhance self-respect. A participant who started chicken farm and mushroom cultivation and continue through the help of CSR: *“Through the help of CSR, I have been able to continue the chicken farm and mushroom cultivation that I started, I have able to support in children’s study, definitely I have increased my respect in my family”* (P-6, age 29). Financial independence leads to autonomy on decision making like-taking a personal loan, purchase of LIC policies for family security, hospitalization of family members, purchase of vehicles, investment in fixed deposits (Mitra & De, 2024). A participant shares her experience of how she receives love and respect from the entire family members. *“Through CSR I am capable to earn some money from bee keeping and making agarbati, and able to help financially to my family through buy medicine for fathers-in-law. As a result, I receive so much love and support from my husband and my in-laws”* (P-9, age- 37).

The above-described theme shows how women became financially independent after involving in SHG which is supported by CSR. They use their free time in making agarbati, cultivating mushrooms, farming chicken, making phynle etc, through which they earn money which leads to gain respect towards them, giving freedom on decision making and self-confidence in their family.

Theme 2: Enhanced access and quality of life through CSR initiatives

Respondents described how CSR play a vital role in their life. Various initiatives taken by CSR, through which they can access better educational facilities, health care facilities, drinking water facilities, receives various scholarships, skill development programmes, sanitations etc. These initiatives empower rural women who were backward and confined within the four walls, which leads to financial independent. One participant shared about the accessibility: *“They give scholarships to our children, school bags, provide health camps, distribute free medicine, teach us about diseases, provide free mosquito nets, and teach us how to stay clean and tidy, provide drinking water”* (P-2 age 31). As one of the studies conducted by (Mahmud, et.al, 2020) shows corporate social responsibility provides scholarships to meritorious students contributing to construct buildings for club, school, library, hospitals, offering various training programs to farmers, other technical sector’s labours to develop their skills. A participant shares her quality of life: *“Through CSR I am able to earn separately. If we have money, everything becomes*

possible. Our food, clothing, everything changes due to CSR initiatives. The company helps a lot, teaching to work, provide everything, even marketing due to which I can earn money, now standard of living of my family has increased” (P-4 age 36).

Theme 3: CSR initiatives- settlements and challenges

CSR provides an ambience of benefit to the rural women in terms of settlement; however, they are also found to face certain challenges. Respondent described there are so many initiatives taken by corporate social responsibility, such as- establishment of hospitals, provide free school bags, free books, aware about diseases through health camps, alleviate poverty through employment creation, promote social facilities like- drinking water and roads, economic responsibilities like- job creation, credit provision, helping farmers through the provision of farming supplies etc. One participation shared her experience about the impacts of CSR *“I have experienced some benefits from CSR, they provide skill development trainings, through which I am getting benefits, cultivating mushrooms and making incense sticks, earning some money, due to which I have been able to create my own identity” (P-3 age 28).*

CSR provides social infrastructure such as – schools, hospitals, roads, water supply to the communities. It also sharing the negative consequences. Due to the industrialization communities suffer from air pollution and water pollution lead to diseases like-typhoid fever, cholera etc (Masum, et.al, 2020). Similarly, studies conducted by (Heenetigala, 2016). Companies conducted community development practices such as- donation of medical equipment to rural hospitals, healthcare centres, free consultation and medicine, health camps, dengue eradication programs, blood donation campaigns, establish of dental clinics, programs for employment and empowerment of women, provide drinking water, livelihood development and capacity building programs, milk collection projects, donate seeds and fertilizers.

Participants share some obstacles faced by them: *“The company people provided me with powder, stick, strainer, baskets, and water pumps. The problem was in selling. I could not take it to the main market, so I am going around to all the shops in this locality and installing them for small amount. As a result, I lost a lot. It would be good if there is a better marketing system” (P-8 age 43).* *“They gave me 30 chicks. I raised them in 50 days. Just when it was time to sell them, no one from the company came. The chickens remained at home. They could not be sold. We sold them at the local market for a small amount. As a result, we lost a lot of money and*

was scolded at home” (P-6 age-38). The above discussed theme talks about both the positive and negative impacts of corporate social responsibility.

Theme 4: CSR brings women empowerment, social status and gender equality

Empowerment enhances social recognition through financial independence in their family and society. Gender equality possible when women access equal opportunities in education, employment, health care etc. One participant shared about the barriers of women empowerment *“I got married at a young age without proper education, I cannot leave the house, the family is saying, you take care of the family, take care of the children, we are earning money, you don’t need to go out”* (P-2 age 31) nevertheless, CSR helps these women to achieve such mobility by engaging in SHGs.

There are several reasons of women dis-empowerment such as patriarchal system, religion misinterpretation, lack of education, lack of employment opportunities, wife beating, afraid of the husband, lack of access to mobile phones, obstacles encountered by women in social and medical environment, dowry deaths, sexual harassments, abduction of women and girls are the main hindrances to women empowerment in India (Bullo, 2018; Mishra & Banerjee, 2024). Participants share the interference of the society towards the mobility of these women such as one of them says *“When I agreed to my family that I wanted to earn some money outside, they understood but the neighbour is saying, you are letting your daughter-in-law out and not feeding her”* (P-8 age 36).

A participant shares her opinion on women’s empowerment:

“I believe the most important areas for women’s empowerment involve- Women should be educated, have access to good healthcare facilities, have freedom, know their rights, we should vote according to our own will and not at the directive of anyone. This means we should have knowledge in the political field, and be economically independent” (P-10 age 42)

The above-described theme talks about why women are disempowered in our society. There are several reasons like- patriarchal mindset, superstition beliefs, illiteracy, unemployment, wife beating, dominance of husband and in-laws, dowry deaths, mental and sexual harassments but they find CSR initiatives to be an encouraging structure towards their freedom.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The study shows women empowerment is seen through the linkage between the self-help group and corporate social responsibility. Self-help group plays a crucial role in promoting women's livelihood. It provides employment opportunities mostly to the rural women. Self-help group has significant impact on overall empowerment of women. There is the strong positive impact on women's credit access, decision making and control over income use (Kumar, et.al, 2021). There are many hindrances to women empowerment in India (Mishra & Banerjee, 2024) which the big business tries to overcome by addressing the needs of the companies as the Government initiatives are inadequate (Mahapatra, 2024; Mahapatra et al, 2024).

Various initiatives taken by CSR regarding women's empowerment, through which they are able to access the better educational facilities, health care facilities, drinking water facilities, receives various scholarships, skill development programmes, sanitations etc. These initiatives empower rural women who were backward and confined within the four walls, which leads to financial independent. CSR have many roles and impacts in community development, such as- Transfer of technology from international companies to developing countries, environmental protection actions that made together by corporation and communities, the close bond between the corporation and community create sustainable development. CSR helps to alleviate poverty in the community, helps in data gathering by ICT firms to facilitate public organization function (Ismail, 2009). In present-day, financial independence of women and decision-making power of women is increasing day by day because now they are capable to challenge the traditional pattern of dependency, like- dependent on father, brother, husband etc. Financial independence leads to personal and social empowerment of women (Choudhary & Ray, 2024).

A big transformation is observed in the personal and societal identity after joining in self-help groups which is supported by CSR. The women experience independence not only financially but also in decision making in domestic matters, which leads respect towards them. Thus, IMFA Company help them in livelihood generation through farming honey, making phynle, running a chicken farm, cultivating mushrooms etc. They help in capacity building and skill development of the rural women. They also provide raw materials in free of cost like-seeds, fertilizers, strainer, baskets etc, and help in marketing of these products for greater profit and saving thereby making these women not only financially independent but also socially empowering them.

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