

ATST: Developing Grassroot Leadership as the Vehicle of Women Empowerment and Change in Society

Introduction:

At The Same Table™ (ATST) is an equal platform for free and frank discussion on issues and ideas that collectively concern the funding community. It is hosted by EdelGive each quarter. In the last year, EdelGive has hosted 4 other ATSTs on water, the New Education Policy, and women's empowerment.

This edition of At The Same Table™ was on 'Developing Grassroot Leadership as the Vehicle of Women Empowerment and Change in Society' w.r.t the Sustainable Development Goal No. 5 – to '*achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls*'.

Women living in poor communities are consistently identified as one of the most vulnerable groups owing to their meagre asset base, social marginalization, lack of mobility and exclusion from decision-making processes. To bring about a lasting change in the society, it is therefore, important to recognize that women's vulnerabilities are embedded in social, economic and political processes—and the development gaps that reproduce them.

The meeting began with an introduction Vidya Shah – CEO, EdelGive Foundation, who spoke about how Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment has been EdelGive's focus over the last decade. She said that EdelGive had put together a gender positioning paper which was being shared at this meeting.

When speaking about the work on gender, she said that women's empowerment programs adopt a rights based approach which is something that corporates are typically not comfortable with, given that it is edgy, political, difficult to implement and even more difficult to measure in terms of tangible results. She said that she had noticed that even though Bengaluru has a number of excellent philanthropy initiatives, there are at present not too many on gender. Vidya Shah said that the best way to understand gender programs is to hear directly from implementers and participants of women empowerment programs. She said that CORO members would talk about the challenges they faced – getting men to give up their position of power in gender equations, the achievements – getting men and boys to support and actively participate in gender equality programs and the impact on women – in their own lives, families and communities

Ms. Sujata Khandekar from CORO, who gave a brief description of CORO and on grass-root leadership, spoke about how CORO has grown into a community owned program, which hinges on community participation, and where leadership is drawn from and nurtured within the community. She said that women empowerment programs focus on fostering a sense of empowerment within the individual, involving the community, increasing community participation in the process and ultimately fostering a sense of ownership of the process and the goal. Sujata Khandekar spoke about the action research on "Building masculinity" that CORO conducted together with Population Council. She said that the research showed that there is no single construct of masculinity, and that women also contribute to building and entrenching

some of the constructs of masculinity. Sujata Khandekar also spoke of the -"Meen Raju Manch, a Unicef supported program, on gender equality, for children (boys and girls) in 23000 government schools. Ms. Bhagyashree and Ms. Nehamehdi, from CORO run programs, spoke of their involvement in these programs and how being a part of this had directly and indirectly impacted their lives.

In the brief but involved discussion that followed, participants asked questions and offered insights, based on their experience from the field. A few of the significant discussion points are listed here:

On the expectations of the funders from the program, and on the expectations of the organizations from their funders – There is an interplay of several elements of NGO–donor relationships, and ‘trust’ forms the most important constituent at work here. More often than not, changes that have the ability to transform – are based on attitude change and behavior modification and are a very long, slow process, which is hard to measure. It is therefore important for NGO and funder to work together from the start to carefully articulate how processes will be run and to regularly evaluate the course of the program.

Periodic achievements like the number of girls in the program, number of girls continuing in the program, etc. can be communicated, but change in numbers especially for organisations with a ‘rights based approach’ is difficult to report. In women empowerment programs there is no linear output, no direct link between an activity and a measurable outcome and it is crucial for donors to understand this and therefore give the NGO time and space in which to experiment and evolve the program. Different methods of measurement were discussed such as Most Significant Change (MSC), and the need to set up a measurement matrix employing good qualitative research tools to capture the process and the change. An element of reflection and learning should also be added into the monitoring and evaluation of any such program. This helps in shaping NGO behavior and alter dependence on donors.

Importance of collaboration between NGOs, donors and gender programs to avoid duplication of effort and a consequent waste resources. Given that women’s empowerment programs are long term but have immense capacity to effect a change at the system level, significant funding is required from informed donors, who have the capacity and the willingness to invest long term. At present there are similar programs being run in different locations without knowledge of each other and there is a need to collate information on these programs, so that there is optimum gain from the programs and minimum wastage of resources.