

Meeting Practical Needs and Strategic Gender Interests of Clients for Excellence in Programs and Services

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Executive Summary

This paper urges the need for a paradigm shift while designing programs for vulnerable groups from a “service” to an “empowerment” perspective. It suggests ways of translating conceptual resources into practice to identify the actual needs (practical needs and strategic gender interests), resources and agencies of a social group, which are required to design a program from an empowerment perspective. This may lead towards attaining excellence in designing and delivering policies, programs and services (Government of Canada, n.d., p. 2) that meet the actual needs of clients, increase efficiency, and have the potential for a positive socio-economic impact.

Introduction

This paper is based on a major research project (Chowdhury, 2015) that I conducted on recent skilled South Asian immigrant women in Brantford, Ontario. The emphasis of the paper is grounded by the conceptual resources I used in that qualitative research to interpret and analyze research findings for identifying the root cause(s) of barriers faced by this group at individual level for their effective socio-economic integration. I used these conceptual resources to reveal practical needs and strategic gender interests, resources (material and non-material), and agencies of this group. The broad research question of the research is related to taking insights from microfinance for social capital formation and the empowerment of this group. Here, the focus will be limited to the first two research sub-questions as these are critical for the discussion of this paper. The central thrust of the first sub-question is to identify the barriers this group faces at the individual level that impede their effective socio-economic integration. The second sub-question pursues for perception of empowerment of this group and the skills and conditions that they consider are necessary to be empowered.

I employed semi-structured interviews with open ended questions and interviewed nine recent skilled South Asian immigrant women (all of them had minimum bachelor's degrees) and two self-employed South Asian men. The paper begins with description of the key conceptual resources, then follows with a brief discussion of the research findings relevant to the focus of this paper, and finally provides recommendations for consumption by policy planners and program designers. It is recommended that they give deep consideration to the findings and take into account the actual needs (both practical needs and strategic gender interests) of this social group while designing programs for greater efficiency and positive impact.

Description of the Key Conceptual Resources

What is Culture and how does it manifest itself?

Edward Tylor, in *Primitive Culture* (1870) defines culture as “that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society” (Tylor, 1958, p. 1). Every member of a social group, therefore, possesses culture and this explicitly or implicitly shapes his or her knowledge, habits and capabilities. According to Schein (1984), culture manifests itself at three different levels: (1) visible elements, such as how a social group dresses, and the manner in which they address each other; (2) adopted values that govern behaviour; and (3) basic underlying assumptions that determine how a social group perceives, feels, and thinks (p. 3). Schein (1984) argues that these underlying assumptions are not often a result of oppression, but as “certain motivational and cognitive processes are repeated and continue to work, they become unconscious” (p. 4). Schein (1984) posits to really discover more completely the group's values and behaviour, it is essential to probe into the underlying assumption (p. 3). These assumptions can be brought back to consciousness only through focused questions, where the insider (the participant) makes the

unconscious assumptions and the outsider (the inquirer) facilitates discovery of the assumption by asking the appropriate kinds of questions (p. 4).

Empowerment:

Kabeer (1999) conceptualizes empowerment in terms of three interrelated aspects: agency (process), resources (material and non-material), and achievements (outcomes) (pp. 437-438). Agency refers to purposeful and actively exercising choice. It has two dimensions. The first one is greater effectiveness of agency (e.g., decision making ability) that helps women in carrying out their roles and responsibility. The second one is transformative agency that changes women's behaviour to challenge power relations (Kabeer, 2005, pp. 14-15). Hence, agency can include decision making, bargaining and negotiation abilities, to the more intangible processes of reflecting on and questioning one's values and beliefs to become more critical conscious about those values and beliefs (Kabeer, 1999, p. 438). Kabeer (1999) posits agency can be exercised individually as well as collectively via both material (e.g., employment, education, and skills building training) and non-material resources (e.g., various human and social resources that increase one's ability to exercise choice) (pp. 437-438). Together, agency, resources and achievements create the pathway by which the process of empowerment occurs (Kabeer, 2005, p. 15).

Practical Needs and Strategic Gender Interests:

According to Moser (1989), practical needs are those which women perceive necessary within a given context, such as child care, skills training, among others. Strategic gender interests relate to the needs that arise from the complexities of gender division of labour, which vary considerably across social groups, and shaped by their ideological, historical, religious, ethnic

and cultural determinants (Moser, 1989, p. 1800). Thus, in order to empower a vulnerable group, especially women, it is very important to identify their strategic gender interests. This is because the way a culture divides work among men and women highlights the complexities of gender division of labour. This can create problematic disparities and inequalities for the individuals to operate on a level playing field with others (UNESCO's Gender Mainstreaming Implementation Framework, 2003, pp. 1-2).

Social Capital:

Social capital can be defined as the active connections among individuals with the capacity to affect the productivity of individuals and groups by providing resources for actions (Putnam, 2000, pp.19-20; Coleman, 1988, pp. 98-99). There are two different types of social capital: bonding social capital, and bridging social capital (Putnam, 2000). Bonding social capitals comprise family and intimate friends, and they are valuable for a sense of identity, psychological and social support (Putnam, 2000, p. 22). Bridging social capital connect us to others who are somewhat distant. Bridging social capital enables people to access valuable information on various resources and opportunities in the community from a range of networks. It connects people with others who move in different circles, or are established in different social institutions or in positions of authority (Putnam, 2000, p. 23; Raza, 2012, p. 24).

Discussion on the Relevant Research Findings

In examining the barriers to socio-economic integration, the participants identified a number of factors such as non-recognition of foreign credentials, lack of Canadian work experiences, lack of social networks, and lack of child care. Immigrant women from all cultures, more or less, face these obstacles. Thus, it became crucial to dig below the surface of the culture

of the participants to identify their underlying shared cultural assumption, and uncover their strategic gender interests. Some strategic interests are identifiable by women, especially when women perceive inequality is taking place because of active discrimination by men as a dominant group (Kabeer, 1999, p. 440). However, sometimes women may not be able to speak out about the basis of the disadvantage because some cultural assumptions are so taken for granted that they become invisible (Kabeer, 1999, p. 441). Schein (1984) argues these cultural assumptions may not be the result of oppression, but as “certain motivational and cognitive processes are repeated and continued to work, they become unconscious” (p.4). Therefore, Schein’s (1984) cultural analysis is helpful to bring back the underlying cultural assumption of this group to consciousness, and uncover their strategic gender interest. In doing so, it highlights the very specific factor, which operate at the individual level and put these women at a disadvantage in their new societal context. By asking a series of questions on gender division of labour, market and domestic tasks, and questions related to technological competence, it is possible to elicit a pattern. This pattern reveals the overarching factor that is placing these women in jeopardy to equally compete is their internalization of the shared underlying cultural assumption: men are responsible for market tasks and women are responsible for domestic tasks.

As the participants describe their day to day life habits and their preferences for completing tasks, it is apparent that they are “not interested”, “not comfortable”, “not confident”, and “not used to doing” certain tasks because those tasks are considered by these women as “men’s jobs”. The participants note these are their “cultural things”. In their culture, men are considered the primary salary earners and the main people responsible for outside tasks (i.e., market tasks); women are essentially responsible for child rearing and home making tasks (i.e., domestic tasks). Most of the participants’ responses confirm this cultural value of different role

requirements for men and women is not imposed on them. What is significant from their responses is that they have a cognitive process of segregating certain tasks again and again and becoming unaware of doing this.

The aforementioned patterns of actions and habits of the participants of not actively participating in market tasks, are affecting these women's employability skills formation and promotion. In a technologically advanced country such as Canada, most of the market tasks (e.g., buying or selling goods, paying bills, negotiating with businesses on various matters, etc.) can be performed from home. It is possible for an individual to gain competence in communication skills (both verbal and written English), technological skills and other market skills without leaving the home. By internalizing the value of different gender roles, these women put themselves at a disadvantage in terms of learning and gaining competence with market tasks. Moreover, this makes these women more dependent on their husbands for performing these tasks. Their cultural habit of eschewing technology in their day to day activities further diminishes their capabilities of using technology for employment purposes. Not only that, this tendency of depending on the male partners to make decisions on big issues and the habit of playing a non-decision-making role are negatively affecting these women as they do not gain self-confidence, decision-making ability, or self-determination to act independently. All these attributes are indispensable personal qualities and employable skills of individuals in Western cultures.

Findings related to perception of empowerment reveal financial independence is the most important aspect of empowerment for the participants. The group indicates that performing a job where they can utilize their academic knowledge and expertise is worthwhile and empowering. Kabeer's (1999, 2005) concept of empowerment is useful to denote the group's needs and how

these needs may be satisfied. The group identifies material resources (i.e., language proficiency, computer training, and having formal education from Canada), non-material resources such as bridging social capital (for gaining information, references, and economic opportunities) and the agency or process (i.e., decision making ability, self-confidence, and self-reliance), which they need to become empowered. The participants' responses indicate the value of bridging social capital, not only as a form of non-material resource, but also as a source of agency that is transformative, and crucial for challenging gender roles and responsibilities (Kabeer, 2005, p. 15). One of the participants' statements reveal the ways in which bridging social capital redirect her acts and brings about changes in her perception of doing things in new ways. This social capital plays a critical role in the creation of human capital (Coleman, 1988, p. 100), and helps this participant acquire the skills and capabilities (i.e., self-confidence and self-reliance) crucial for living and working in this radically different cultural environment.

Policy Implications and Conclusion

The policy implications of the aforementioned findings are significant as these indicate ways of translating conceptual resources into practice to reveal practical needs and strategic gender interests, resources, and agencies of this group. For instance, cultural analysis helps to identify strategic gender interests of the women, especially those which they cannot consciously name because of their internalization of the cultural values. The women pointed-out professional language training, computer training, Canadian education, and programs that help develop social networks as important elements to attaining empowerment. However, they did not mention the inclusion of training in market tasks (e.g., online banking, filling taxes, negotiating with outside organizations, among others) that represent taken-for-granted skills in Western society. Incorporating these skills building training in programs and services can boost their self-

confidence and self-reliance. This may lead them to deliberately adopt other acts and habits that challenge their traditional roles but are essential for their desired labour market integration.¹

Hence, a regular, relational service delivery that intentionally incorporates skills training (e.g., professional English language and computer training, training on various market tasks, and so on) and bridging social capital can meet the practical needs and strategic gender interests of the women. Skills training will enable these women to gain practical skills and help develop expertise and confidence. Moreover, interacting on a regular basis with individuals from the dominant culture will help them to gain knowledge, attitudes, and reciprocity, which they require to gain transformative agency to act in new ways in their new home country.

Existing government funded (both federal and provincial) programs can be creatively tailored through partnerships among different community organizations to deliver services that meet the actual needs of these women. For instance, an immigrant serving agency can take a lead role and partner with other agencies (such as those responsible for language training, entrepreneurship development etc.) to provide an all-inclusive service. The lead agency can involve youth (high school and university students) and use their volunteer hours to assist the women in various skills-building. This will widen the scope in providing a number of services to the women without adding additional costs. Involving youth with the program will also enable the youth to connect their class room knowledge with social practices, and help develop leadership skills and their own sense of agency.² Similarly, interested retired professionals, business persons, and community leaders can also be used as facilitators to share their

¹ Ferraro (1998) makes a similar point in his chapter, “Coping with Culture Shock”, chapter seven of his book (p. 138).

² See the United Nations award winning Youth Empowering Parents (YEP) program’s website <http://yepeducation.com/>, as a resource.

experiences and knowledge.³ This citizenship engagement may open up additional opportunities for civic activity, initiatives for self-employment and successful integration to the workforce. Hence, the aforementioned way of designing a program from an empowerment perspective will meet the actual needs of the women, increase program efficiency, and may have the potential for a positive socio-economic impact.

³ See El-Zoghbi, Montesquiou & Hashemi (2009, pp. 2-4) for the microfinance programs that target ultra-poor (the very poor people who have no assets and are chronically food insecure). To increase self-confidence and reduce social isolation of the clients, these programs provide intensive support such as close monitoring and regular interaction with the program staff and community members. Many programs create 'village assistance committees' which are usually comprised of local community leaders, teachers, and village elders. These committees maintain a relationship with the participants and help them to be integrated with the community.

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