Empowering Women and Families through Self Help Groups:
The Botswana Experience

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ABSTRACT

The situation of women across the world is a concern for governments, donors, academics and development practitioners who have observed on-going disempowerment of women in the process of development. While much is known about women's level of disempowerment, little is known about relevant empowerment models and practical responses to address the challenges they face including feminization of poverty and gender inequalities. Project Concern International-Botswana (PCI) is implementing one empowerment model known as the Grass-Root building Our Wealth (GROW) model. The objective of this chapter is to share the experiences of poor women in Botswana who are currently using the GROW model to transform their lives. The model's vision is to build capacity of the poor into competent self-reliant individuals who will grow in confidence and seek to broaden their horizons. The task of the GROW model is to help poor people realize their potential and to take action by implementing plans that turn their empowerment dreams into reality.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter presents experiences of fourteen (14) women who through self-mobilization, commitment and use of local resources have broken the bondage of poverty and become empowered. What makes their empowerment story fascinating is the use of natural talents they have with no or minimal formal education, virtually no formal work experience, still working their agricultural land and no background in running an empowerment self-help group. As most of them are single mothers or widows, they largely follow a traditional life style of subsistence farming in an urban village of Molepolole in Botswana in order to take care of their families. Despite their background, these women mobilized themselves into a self-help group known as Kgopolano GROW group. The group's overarching goal is empowerment of self-using the GROW model. Since its inception in 2011, the GROW self-help group has provided the physical energy, local knowledge and skills towards achieving its objectives of transforming the lives of poor women in Molepolole. Their hope and confidence in the ability to change their lives for the better continues to be the source of inspiration for the group members.

This chapter shares an empowerment journey of the women through active participation in the GROW self-help group implementing the GROW model. The ultimate aim of the women is to empower themselves by transforming their lives from poverty to sustainable livelihoods. This chapter tells a story of how the women have worked against all the odds to create their own source of wealth and livelihood. It is important to point out that this chapter is not meant to critic this empowerment journey in terms of achievement or failures i.e. how well the group has achieved or failed to achieve set objectives, rather, it brings out the power of self-mobilization to empower and transform lives through the GROW model. The emphasis is on the principles of empowerment that made it possible for these women with a poverty stricken background, to break through to empowerment. It then demonstrates strategies that can be used across the globe for empowering women to take initiatives to escape poverty. Specifically, the chapter examines the following questions:

1. What is the GROW model and its role in empowerment?
2. What facilitated effective implementation of the GROW model by the Kgopolano GROW group?
3. What challenges were experienced in the implementation of the GROW model by Kgopolano GROW Group?
4. What lessons can be drawn from the experiences of the Kgopolano Grow group in relation to major principles and strategies of effective empowerment of women who desire to escape poverty and become active agents of their own empowerment?

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