

CASE STUDY ON INNOVATIVE SCHEME FOR WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT IN HARYANA

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Abstract

The paper is based on the study on a scheme for women's empowerment in the Indian state of Haryana. The scheme *Sakshar Mahila Samooh* is an innovative strategy of empowering rural women through the formation of village- based women organization. The study was conducted in three districts using qualitative and quantitative approach to explore the scheme and its impact on the empowerment of the women. The present paper gives brief case studies of women empowerment through this innovative program and analysis of focus group discussion held with the members of the scheme to explore the scheme and identify various empowerment themes. The focus discussions were transcribed manually to analyse the data. The study finds that the scheme has empowered its members (rural women) socially, psychologically, politically and economically. The scheme works innovatively by creating social awareness, social mobilization and giving identity to the literate and educated rural women to discharge responsibilities of uplifting the rural communities.

Key Words: Innovative scheme, women empowerment, empowerment themes.

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Introduction

In the patriarchal societies the third wave feminism has positively affected the lives of women in the urban areas but in the rural areas the patriarchal mindset is still prevalent. In the rural society masculinity and stereotyping of behavioural norms are stronger and are regulated by the local and non- recognized institutions which dominate over institutional mechanisms like caste- based or religion- based groups. The Indian rural women empowerment programs are also not able to address this issue as it is operating in a patriarchal social system. To achieve empowerment of women, programs that are pro eve- empowerment i.e programs that help to overcome the belief and practices of patriarchy should be formulated and implemented especially in rural areas.

To achieve Gender equations in Haryana is a challenge. Over the last decade and particularly in the last two years, there has been a phenomenal increase in violence against women in Haryana as reported in the print and electronic media. The census report shows that Haryana had started off the 20th century with a sex ratio of 867 and it ended it with a sex ratio of 865. It entered the 21st century with an even lower sex ratio of 861. The census figures of Haryana 2011 show 830 females to 1,000 males in the category of 0-6 years of age. Districts such as Jhajjar, Mahendergarh and Rewari which earlier had good sex ratio are now worst districts on the juvenile sex- ratio. It will be a challenge to evaluate the given proposition in the context of a strong patrilineal and patriarchal society like that of Haryana—a state where custom and cultural patterns deny any property rights to women; a state which makes a mockery of the legal enablement by not allowing women to exercise property rights; a state notorious for its mindless violence as seen in the so called ‘crimes of honour’ and finally a state well known to wipe out all future property related claims of girls by eliminating them in the womb itself. In other words - a state at its violent best. (Prem Chowdhry, 2011)

The term empowerment has different aspects in socio-culture and political contexts, and does not convert easily into all language. The empowerment includes self- strength, self-power, control, reliance, life of dignity in accordance with one's values, own choice, capable of fighting for one's rights, own decision making, independence, awaking, being free and has an ability, to mention only a few.

Empowerment begins with awareness of gender inequalities. The awareness definition of women's empowerment refer to "a process whereby women, individually and collectively, become aware of how power relations operate in their lives and gain the self- confidence and strength to challenge gender inequalities "

Empowering women means 'strengthening them to confront the traditional patriarchal forces and biases operating in the family, community, caste, religion and society '(Arya, 2000:147)

In the India context, women's empowerment does mean 'the loss of man's traditional power and to control over the women of the household' (Pamei, 2001). Empowerment is an active process of self- help. The aim of Women empowerment is to help develop adult women. An adult women is a person who can look at a situation, weigh the pros and cons, take decision and bare the consequences of these decisions with courage and without feeling guilt. Women's empowerment consist of acquiring knowledge and an understanding of gendered relations and developing a sense of self- worth and the belief in one's ability to secure desired changes.

Women's empowerment is dynamic process. Empowerment is a social process or well planned social change by – products of which are empowered women. In the process of empowerment women look at old problems in new ways, analyze their situation, recognize their strengths, access new kinds of information and knowledge, acquired new strengths and initiate action in that gaining greater control over resources, situation and ideologies. Levels of Empowerment are 'pre-empowerment, intra- personal at micro level, inter-personal at meso level, and institutional at macro level' (Busch and Valentine, 2009).

Rappaport's (1987) concept of empowerment, "conveys both a psychological sense of personal control or influence and a concern with actual social influence, political power and legal rights" (p.121). In this sense, empowerment can exist at three levels: at the personal level, where empowerment is the experience of gaining increasing control and influence in daily life and community participation (Keiffer, 1984); at the small group level, where empowerment involves the shared experience, analysis, and influence of groups on their own efforts (Presby,Wandersman, Florin, Rich, & Chavis, 1990); and at the community level, where

empowerment revolves around the utilization of resources and strategies to enhance community control (Labonte, 1989). At individual level empowerment is the experience of gaining increasing control and influence in daily life and community participation (Keiffer, 1984).

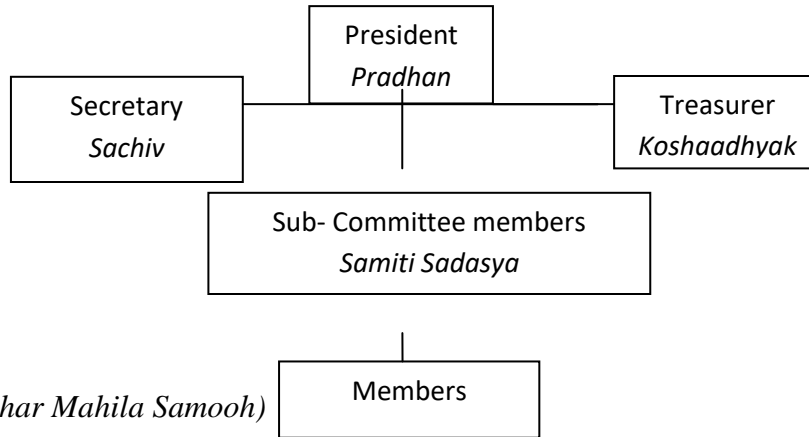
Research Method

The paper is based on the thesis to study empowerment through the *Sakshar Mahila Samooh* (SMS) scheme in the State of Haryana. The paper explores empowerment themes through qualitative tools applied in the study area. The study was conducted in three districts, Sonapat, Panipat and Jind. These districts were selected on the bases of indicators like low sex ratio, violence against women and domination of certain castes. The present paper is the analysis of FGDs conducted with the members in selected SMS and select individual case studies. In all the three districts, three SMSs were selected purposively that were active in conducting regular activities and utilizing funds released exclusively for SMS related activities by Department of Women and Child development and Department of Health. The theme of first FGD was “SMS formation, membership, activities and status in community”. The theme of second FGD was “process of empowerment” The FGD was held with 8-10 members who were willing to participate with prior information. The data was collected manually and analysed to identify various themes of empowerment through the scheme.

Results and Analysis

The *Sakshar Mahila Samooh* (SMS) is a group of literate and educated women formed within a village to organize activities for the upliftment of women and children. The formation of SMS and its registration was done by all Programme Officers of ICDS. SMS have been formed & registered in 6247 villages of the State as per the information on the official website. After the formation of *Sakshar Mahila Samooh*, the department of Women and Child Development , Haryana, notified to the different departments about its formation and possibilities of utilization of these women groups for programs in the rural areas.

As per the guidelines given by Department of Women and Child Development and during the study, SMS members described the structure of the SMS group. SMS members were found to have following structure in their respective groups.



The classification of activities and functions of *Sakshar Mahila Samooh* under various departments identified during the study were:

| Sr. No. | Name of the department | Activities and functions of <i>Sakshar Mahila Samooh</i> |
|---------|--|---|
| 1 | Department of Health, Haryana | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Organize Health related activities according to the Flipchart developed exclusively for SMS to be implemented in the community. |
| 2 | Department of Women and Child Development | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Supervision of <i>aganwari</i> centers, mid day meals, maintain records , Conduct activities like <i>mohalla</i> meetings and rallies of social issues like dowry, female feticide, child marriage, domestic violence, promotion of 1098 etc. |
| 3 | Women Development corporation, Haryana or DRDA | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Formation of SHGs with APL and BPL women and hold regular meetings, facilitation of skill development trainings like candle making, pickle making, <i>donas</i>, paper bags etc. Organize short term course on stitching and tailoring and Beautician skills |
| 4 | Department of Education | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Conducting adult education classes in the villages and in brick factories (<i>Bhatta Patshala</i>) for children of |

| | | |
|---|------------------------------------|---|
| | | <p>migrated families through innovative education centers.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Awareness generation on SSA. • Participation in <i>Sakshar Bharat</i> Mission. • Organizing Self defense training for school going children. |
| 5 | <i>Panchayati</i> Raj Institution | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Village development like construction of streets and drainage in the village. • Ensuring participation of villagers in <i>Gram Sabha</i>. • Facilitation in Govt. Schemes. |
| 6 | Haryana Power Corporation | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Meter reading in the village and bill distribution and bill payment through focal points established within the village. |
| 7 | District Legal Service Authorities | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Addressing legal issues related to Domestic violence, dowry, child labour, child marriage, property disputes etc. • Working as counselors in Village based legal – aid clinic. |
| 8 | Forest Department, Haryana | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Formation of Self Help Groups. • Tree Plantation • Programs on Environment awareness |

The study notes two specific responsibilities given to *Sakshar Mahila Samooh(s)* i.e. Book keeping: Every *pradhan*/ leader of *Sakshar Mahila Samooh* has to manage bank account along with one *samooh* member who is appointed as the secretary of the *samooh*. The *pradhan* and the secretary are authorized to withdraw money from the SMS account for conducting monthly activities like organizing rallies, group meetings and *pakwadas*. The money is used for buying refreshments, making banners, taking pictures for records etc. In all the groups it was observed that the secretary was maintaining the records of financial transactions. She was also responsible for keeping the balance cash for its use in future programs. In *Sakshar Mahila Samooh, Amarheri* village it was found that the *samooh* members have received projects from various

government department, Haryana. The *samooh* has been able to save some amount for the welfare of its members. Some money has been used for fixed deposit in the bank and is kept as saving fund for the group. It was found that in all the SMS groups except in SMS *Amarheri* village there was no saving and the *Samoohs* were organizing activities as per the budget received from the Department of Women and Child Development and Department of Health, Haryana. The *Samooh's pradhans* had also done regular audit for checking irregularity of fund. **Documentation of activities:** Each *Samooh* leader has to keep records of all the activities conducted during a month for the purpose of documentation. The records that are maintained by the *samooh pradhans* were pictures of the activities, description of activities conducted in Hindi language, attendance of members, media coverage and news paper clippings of the activities conducted in the community.

Case Studies of empowerment through *Sakshar Mahila Samooh*

Case Study 1: The first case study is of Ms Asha, a mother of two daughters and victim of gender- based discrimination. She is an active volunteer since her early years of her life. She could not complete her schooling but had keenness to teach others and help others. As an adult after her marriage she gave birth to her first daughter and then after few years her second daughter was born. She faced discrimination and isolation but she never stopped her heartfelt desire to help others. She had good support from her husband and therefore she decided to step out and work for the community. She became the *panch* member but she still felt disempowered as she had no voice among the *panchayat* members. She resigned and became the ASHA worker of the community and in few years she again felt that her reach to help others was limited and became the *pradhan* of *Sakshar Mahila Samooh*. As the leader of the *Sammoh*, she reached out to many potential women to work for the community and soon developed action group to counter many social problems and harmful gender based practices. Under her leadership she organized anti arrack protest and successfully removed the shop from the village and its vicinity. She also created safe and secure environment for the village girls to move freely inside the village.

Case Study 2: The second case study is of Ms Neetu is a post- graduate student and belongs to village *Amarheri*. She was a member of *Sakshar Mahila Samooh*. She used to coordinate many activities of the *samooh* for the girls and was an ideal in the community for continuing her

studies. She belongs to lower caste and higher education is still a distant dream in her community. The *Pradhan* of *Sakshar Mahila Samooh* used to invite her for motivational talk to encourage the families to send their daughters for education. She used to counsel girls in her community to take stand for themselves. In 2015 during *panchayat* elections the members of *Sakshar Mahila Samooh* approached her to stand for election. With constant encouragement and support she decided to file her nomination and stood for election. She becomes the first *mahila sarpanch* of the village. She also feels that her family was an open minded family and her father had always encouraged her to follow her dreams. She has inspired many women in her community to have mission to bring positive change in their lives. She was facing resistance from her village from a community group for not standing in election. They wanted some other candidate to win the election. She knew that if the other candidate wins then it will be a great loss as most of the decisions will be of her husband. She also knew that in her village the role and contribution of *panchayat* in past years was negligible. But all her inhibitions were addressed by the *pradhan* and members of *Sakshar Mahila Samooh*.

Case Study 3: The third case study is 40 year old widow, living with her inlaws and extended family. She is a graduation dropped out. Her son studies in a school near the village. She became widow when her son was 2 year old. After losing her son, she soon started facing problems with her in-laws. Her in-laws wanted her to leave the family and wanted custody of her son in their hands. She faced many problems in the family and pressures to leave but she did not succumb to her circumstances and raised her voice for her rights. She approached the local village women for help and also reported the police for help. She was the only woman in the village to be vocal to raise alarm and sought help of the law. She was praised for her action in the village. Soon she was a known face of the village and got noticed by the *aganwadi* supervisor to become the *pradhan* of *Sakshar Mahila Samooh* in her village, Narayna of district Panipat. She went through mental turmoil, she recalls during her husband's death. Even her own parents refuse to support her and told her to serve her inlaws. She wanted emotional and psychological support to overcome the trauma. Her son was too young to understand the dynamics of the house. She was also forced to remarry her brother-inlaw but she refused and even her brother inlaw supported her decision. When she becomes the *pradhan* of the *samooh*, she faced lot of resistance from her family as she was supposed to move in the village for many activities. She belongs to very

orthodox community and women have to face lot of restrictions in the family. She being the *pradhan* had to conduct meetings of the *samooh* members for planning activities. Her family refused to provide space to organize any such activity. But with the support of the *Aganwadri* centers and the staff she flagged off her first meeting and then she never turned back. She decided to support deserted women of her community and formed support group for assistance. She never hesitated to visit the house belonging to other castes. Her caste is the predominant caste of the village and she faces resistance as the daughter- in- law to visit other castes families. Somebody has to challenge the society's thought process.

The world has progressed and if we remain unchanged than who will change the attitude of the society towards us (women). Whenever I meet a victim of gender- based violence, I try to extend my support and ask to victim to dare to change her circumstances.

She is slowly breaking all the age old barriers. She conducted multiple meetings with the village women belonging to all castes and community to spread awareness about the law. She also initiated to take her *samooh* members to the nearest police station in order to break the resistance and inhibitions about law and order.

My members reach out to other women in the community and listen to them. They feel light and venting out. Our village is recorded to have highest reported cases in the police. But in reaching out I sought support from the supervisor and trainings on various programs related to women and children...

Case Study 4: The fourth Case Study is of Mrs *Sunita Devi* of *Chatiya Aulia*, belongs to lower caste living with two daughters. She admits that she was economically poor but gradually with the support of her husband they struggled and build up slowly. She recalls her journey as BPL card holder to become financially self- sufficient family. She gave up BPL card when the family felt that they have achieved enough resources and somebody in need should be given the benefit of raise their economic status. She and her husband also decided to give their daughters good education and she stresses that “if needed I will send my daughters for higher education and work”. She says that it is more important to see what you wish for rather than what others says

about it. The *pradhan* of *Sakshar Mahila Samooh*, and proactive in her approach says that I don't mind reporting to police or other authorities about my neighbourhood without taking the consent if the act is affecting the society negatively. Mrs. *Sunita* has reported many cases of domestic violence and child marriages to the police. She also worked with civil society organizations to address grassroots issues like awareness generation on PRIs, child marriages, female feticide, domestic violence, skill development and trainings etc. She also took initiative to work with Department of Power, in her district and addressed many issue related to electricity in her village. Seeking accountability from *panchayat* is a very important role of *Sakshar Mahila Samooh*. Mrs *Sunita*, as the *Pradhan* was able to gather information on the village development issues. She also used print media to highlight the plight of her village streets by giving pictures of dilapidated lanes and open drains with contaminated water. As a result the village head took action and repaired the streets with concrete for longer usage. She is a well known face of the village and her actions have been noted by the government officials. She has been now given responsibility to implement the government's flagship program of opening bank accounts of poorest of the poor under *Pradhan Mantri Jan Dhan Yojana*. When asked what impact it has made after becoming the *pradhan* of SMS of her village, she replied that identity of *Pradhan* has helped in addressing many issues as the program was initiated by Government of Haryana. The officials were aware about the *Samooh* being formed in every village and therefore they had expectations from the educated rural women. They made the process easy for the women through frequent meetings for addressing their quires. Due to positive action taken by the *pradhan*, there was visible impact on the existing government programs in the village like services of ICDS (Integrated Child Development Scheme) that is implemented through *anganwadris* (a common place for children in villages for healthy development)

Empowerment themes identified in the study

The *Sakshar Mahila Samooh* Scheme is a community oriented program to uproot patriarchal practices in villages by forming groups of rural literate and educated women. The components of empowerment identified may be pointed as follows

(a) **Empowerment as psychological and moral support:** - The support to individual is essential to empower an individual. Psychological and moral support helps the person to take stand within the existing circumstances and challenge to oppose the pressures mounted by the cultural and

traditional value system that are oppressive and discriminatory. The case study of Ms. *Sita*, a widow received moral and psychological support to break the tradition of isolation and restrain from participating in family affairs. The support to lead the women's group in her own village requires her to move out to motivate women to participate where her own participation was restricted. But her capability to become the *Pradhan* was accelerated with support from the community workers that identified *Sita* despite her social status in the community to become the *Samooch* leader. Empowerment and participation are complementary and require significant changes in power relations, both at the level of agency and structure. Agency can be defined as the ability of individuals and groups to think and act in their own interests, and structure as the formal and informal institutions, rules, norms and beliefs that enable and constrain thinking and action. How a program approaches to bring out agency and bring in structural changes is equally important. The *Sakshar Mahila Samooch* scheme interplay with agency and structure by creating resource groups to strengthen agency and affecting the social structure through social awareness and action programs like interventions into domestic violence cases etc. The case study of *Sita* also shows proactive approach to counter the structural imbalances to initiate the process of empowerment.

(b) **Impetus to empowerment process:** The path towards empowerment is a unique experience for each individual. Especially in the context of patriarchy the individuals may decide to empower as victims and non victims. The victims are those which counter the brutal practice against women and non victims are the passive receivers that witness these practices. Empowerment may take place in both the cases. The women as victim counters the situation and struggles to become empower and in later case women counter her lived experience to create more favourable environment for herself. Therefore the impetus to empower may be a conscious or may not be conscious decision. The feeling of being discriminated is the impetus to empowerment. The *Sakshar Mahila Samooch* scheme helps rural women to recognize powerlessness and provides the platform to realise their capabilities. The scheme act as catalysts in creating favourable environment for the women and community at large by reaching out to all castes and groups picking up their leader and members to work as a change makers in their own community.

(c) **Volunteer-ship and intrinsic motivation:** Volunteering is a sign of empowerment. The scheme is based on village based volunteers that are keen to uplift of their own village or community. The scheme includes group of literate women with minimum education up-to matriculation. As per the scheme they are suppose to be the most educated women of the village. Education is however not responsible for countering injustice in the society. The person needs to have awareness and intrinsic motivation to contest for the community. According to (Ryan and Deci, 2000) (pp. 56), Intrinsic motivation is doing of an activity for its inherent satisfaction rather than for some separable consequence. When intrinsically motivated, a person is moved to act for the fun or challenge entailed rather than because of external products, pressures or reward. In the village community the *samooh* members have an identity and are looked up by the people as a resource pool. Their status is also different from the other village functionaries like ASHA (Accredited Social Health Activist), *Aganwadri* worker (Village crèche worker) etc as these women have separate identity as educated and they may also be engaged in some other jobs like school teacher, office related work or they may be perusing studies and in some case they may not be employed. They are invited to become the member of the *samooh* voluntarily. Once they become the members, they receive trainings on various issues related to gender, health, social issues etc. The training further motivates the *samooh* members to organize activities in the community and become the role models for the community.

(d) **Knowledge, concientisation, participation and outcome:** Knowledge is empowering in nature. Knowledge which helps to question the mind of a person is concientisation. Participation and ownership results in positive outcome. The *Sakshar Mahila Samooh* scheme is a people-centred approach whereby rural women disseminate information on community related issues , get into dialogue to talk about women, health, social laws etc and in this process they are able to identify the oppression and the oppressor(s). They gradually take up real feminist issues which may go in contrast to the existing government supported systems like arrack shops in village vicinity. The pedagogy of the Oppressed (1971), Freire also emphasised the importance of Dialogue: the process of conversational encounter and exploration with others that enables critical analysis of the world; Praxis: a process of reflection and action which embodies a commitment to human well-being, the search for truth and respect for others, and; Conscientisation: the process of ‘learning to perceive social, political and economic

contradictions and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality' (Shaull et al. 1972, p.15). The initiation of the scheme has also resulted in many such demonstrations to uproot the arrack shops, raising voice against corruption in front of the district collectors and question the government officials about the existing government schemes and their implementation.

(e) **Empowerment through access to resources and information:** Right to information is synonym to access to information and resources. Mostly in the rural areas the access to information especially to the most vulnerable and disadvantaged group in the community is still a distant dream because the people are unaware about their rights and entitlements. The seed of caste based accessibility is still deep-rooted in Haryana. To address caste based discrimination and power structure the *Sakshar Mahila Samooh* scheme has taken representatives from all the castes that are willing to come forward to work together for development of women and children. This is a unique initiative from the Department of women and child development, Haryana to bring educated rural women from all socio-eco-cultural background to come forward for their own gender rights.

(f) **Impetus to community empowerment process:** Community empowerment includes individual empowerment, group empowerment and broader social and political actions. Community empowerment is therefore both an individual and a group phenomenon. The conceptual roots of community empowerment come primarily from international development work (poor communities needed to become more powerful), the women's health movement (which challenged the prerogative of others to define women's health concerns and remedies) and community mental health activists (who stressed that people with mental disease deserved similar rights to others and ought to be treated in 'empowering' rather than controlling ways). Community empowerment aims to promote participation of people, organizations and communities towards the goals of increased individual and community control, political efficacy, improved quality of life and social justice' (Wallerstein, 1992). The *Sakshar Mahila Samooh* scheme also promotes to achieve control through women participation in the form of *samooh* (group) that seeks accountability from the village *panchayat* (elected village head and other elected members responsible for overall development of the village) to ensure implementation of government programs and schemes for women and children. For strengthening the process of

accountability the *pradhan* of the *Sakshar Mahila Samooh* is given special status as member in various committees at village level like village health and sanitation committee, village education committee etc. This status has the potential to promote women's empowerment and participatory governance by ensuring that PRIs are given funds, and the functionaries works in consonance with the spirit of the 73rd Constitutional amendment and that they are also supported by way of broad-based committees which draw not only on *Gram Panchayat* members but also other key stake holders and members of the village community. The active leadership of the *sammoh pradhan* and its members entails eliciting active participation of educated girls and women in taking forward the social agenda that the State also has set for itself.

(g) **Forming support groups through *samooh* members in the community:** In few villages the *samooh* members have also formed support groups to reach out to the families of victims and needy. These support groups provide emotional, psychological and informational support to the individuals in the community. It is through the support of small groups that many people find a 'voice' and are able to participate in a more formal way to achieve the community empowerment outcomes.

Conclusion

The *Sakshar Mahila Samooh* scheme is one of its kinds and stands out to empower rural women through action groups within the village. The main characteristics or principles that stand out within the scheme are (a) socially motivated literate rural women volunteers (b) representation of women from all castes and socio- economic background (c) sensitization on gender issues and inclusion of SMS in village level committees and *panchayat* works. The scheme empowers the women in multiple ways through awareness generation, supporting individuals through contact and action, conscientization and social action. Within the community there are pro- active women that always take initiatives to create favourable environment. Through the scheme these women are given identity and authority as leader and member of a non-political and community based organization. The scheme has the capacity to bring positive social change if it advances further with the support of women development organizations and government departments in a non feudal way. The women empowerment programs fails as they are controlled by the state. The state supports patriarchy by choosing not to intervene or being slow in intervening

(Walby,1990). It is important to promote schemes like *Sakshar Mahila Samooh*, by the successive governments, which is showing evidences of emancipation so that it continues to dent on the social fabric of the society which is deep rooted in patriarchy.

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