Inspiring Poor Women to Empower Themselves: Insights and Lessons from Botswana

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ABSTRACT

Empirical studies on the impact of micro level intervention strategies on poverty among poor women in Botswana are lacking, yet women are a valuable asset for the economy of the country. Continued marginalization and disempowerment of women has become a serious problem which merit urgent attention. This article investigates the potential of the Grow Model in transforming the lives of 14 women who belong to the Kgopolano GROW Group in Molepolole, Botswana. Data was collected in May 2014 using primarily in-depth interviews and focus group discussions. The analysis utilized both content and thematic approaches. The results showed how the Grow Model has inspired women to empower themselves and self-transform into productive and prosperous lives. The results affirm the strength of the GROW model in promoting empowerment for social change in marginalized contexts. Key policy recommendations recognizes the limitations of the GROW model and build on its strengths.

KEYWORDS

Community Participation, Empowerment, Grass Roots Building Our Own Wealth (GROW), Loans, Perseverance, Poor Women, Project Concern International (PCI), Savings, Self Help Group, Social Change

INTRODUCTION

The research for the book chapter on which the present journal article is based was conducted in 2014 among a group of poor women who have come together to change their lives for the better. The chapter, which was published by IGI Global in 2015 in the book entitled: Cases on Grassroots Campaigns for Community Empowerment and Social Change shared the experiences of the Kgopolano Grow Group in implementing the Grow Model. After receipt of the editors request to submit an enhanced version of the chapter for consideration as a journal article, we revisited the group in Molepolole to assess progress or lack thereof in their commitment to drive change from within using the Grow model. The most recent and exciting findings are shared in this article. This article is about sharing the experiences of 14 poor women in Molepolole, Botswana who have committed their time and energy to change their poverty situation into more sustainable and fulfilling lives driven from within by the process of social change. Little is known about the potential of micro level intervention to development of sustainable livelihoods at household level in an African context and Botswana specifically. To this end, there is a growing interest in the role played by women in the community, in particular, those engaged in innovative life changing development initiatives meant to empower themselves. Under the circumstances, there is, therefore, a need to explore the impact of grassroot intervention on the lives

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of poor rural women in Botswana. This article presents experiences of fourteen (14) women who, through their work with a locally-based international NGO, PCI engaged in self-mobilization, use of local resources and talent and committed themselves to fight debilitating poverty that has become a defining feature of their lives.

THE WOMEN'S PROFILE

The critical questions are: Who are these poor women? Where do they originate from? What do they represent and what have they done to deserve documentation? These are not simple questions that carry no implications. These are questions that are asked to those who have made a difference in their own and other people’s lives. The women studied are poor rural women from Borakalalo Ward, Molepolole – Botswana. The Kgopolano GROW Group came into existence in 2011 with support from one of the local NGO - Hope Worldwide Botswana (HwwB). Borakalalo is a ward in Molepolole with a high concentration of social problems. It has a higher representation of social ills such as poverty, unemployment, and HIV and AIDS. The reason for these vulnerabilities could be attributed to the following factors: lack of economic opportunities, unavailability of information on government economic empowerment programs, female headed households (most of whom are poor) and lack of support from the family, community, government, NGOs and other stakeholders. Taken together, these conditions have led to a debilitating sense of powerlessness and hopelessness in the community. The women deserve attention because they represent the poor who have tirelessly worked together to reach their goals, with no or minimal formal education, virtually no formal work experience. They still work their agricultural land and had no background in running an empowerment self-help group. Given that most of them are single mothers or widows, they largely follow a traditional life style of subsistence farming in order to take care of their children and families. Despite their background, they 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 Kgopolano GROW group has provided the physical energy, local knowledge and skills towards achieving its objectives of transforming the lives of poor women. 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 article shares an empowerment journey of the women through active participation in the Kgopolano GROW 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 article 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 article is not a critic of the empowerment journey in terms of achievement, rather, it articulates the power of self-mobilization to empower and transform lives through the GROW model.

Following the introduction, section two of this article presents the background that interweaves a brief review of the related literature and conceptual frameworks underpinning arguments advanced. Section three is the methodology. Next is section four which presents the findings of the study. Section five is the discussion, followed by section six - recommendations and way forward. Finally, section seven is conclusion.

BACKGROUND: THE BOTSWANA CONTEXT

Botswana is a landlocked country with a population of 2,038,228 million people. The inhabitants are spread over an area of about 582,000 km², approximately the size of France or Kenya (Statistics Botswana, 2011). On the economic front, much has been written about Botswana in scholarly work, which will not be repeated here. For example, Botswana is known as an African success story, which transformed itself from the world’s poorest country at independence in 1966 into a middle income country whose wealth per capita is among the highest in Africa and the world. Some of the major
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