

Adolescent Girls Empowerment through Social Media Activism: A Case study of An NGO 'Jan Vikas Sansthan'

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Abstract

Today, Social media especially Facebook activism has become a major force to promote the empowerment process. Now there are several issues such as woman empowerment, social transformation, human rights, environmental issues, feminist issues, political issues, developmental issues etcetera that are being discussed in the Facebook. We have realised the power of new media during the Arab spring. Indian scenario is changing, so is the role of new media. Facebook has been playing an important role in the socio-political empowerment of women in the country. Intervention of Facebook for adolescent girls' empowerment is evolving in the country. NGOs and other social organization are using Facebook to attract attention of masses in the process of adolescent girls' empowerment. In these circumstances it is very essential to explore how NGOs engaged in adolescent girls' empowerment, utilizing social network specially Facebook which promotes their work and connects to a larger audience. It is also essential to explore how NGOs get support for their work related to adolescent girls empowerment through intervention of social media specially Facebook.

The case study of activities of an NGO, "Jan Vikas Sansthan" and its effort through social media especially Facebook are adopted to explore the intervention of social media on adolescent girls empowerment. This case study is based on the hand-on experience of the researcher who was the coordinator of the said NGO's activities on the Facebook. "Jan Vikas Sansthan" has been working for the educational, cultural and social enhancement of the socio-economically backward adolescent girls at Vasant Vihar (an urban unauthorized colony), Mumfordganj, Prayagraj, Uttar Pradesh. This study reveals the new vistas of strategies and approaches of social media intervention in the field of adolescent girls' empowerments.

Introduction

The urban unauthorized colonies are characterized by large degree of poverty, low levels of productivity, lack of adequate basic minimum services and social reforms. In the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) report, India was ranked 124 among 173 countries of the world in terms of successful implementation of social reforms. The report exposes lack of literacy, primary education, and women participation, high infant mortality ratio and high population growth rate in the urban slum areas. The reason attributed to the failure in achieving the desired objectives is the lack of appropriate orientation of our urban slum development and empowerment programs. The lack of infrastructure and the basic minimum services has led the urban slum population to be underdeveloped. Several policies were formulated to ameliorate the plight of the masses but they have failed to percolate among them and alleviate their plight.

The failure in implementation of measures for urban slum development has led to several socio-economic disabilities like illiteracy, child labor, exploitation of women, poor housing, lack of primary healthcare facilities, poor sanitation, unavailability of potable water and poor income generation. A need was felt to rediscover the importance of urban slum areas development.

Rediscovering the importance of socio-economic development of urban slum areas must also include the discovery of the very people who are critical to its operations and who could, with adequate support and policy changes, make the difference in its success—adolescent girls. In urban slum areas, perhaps more than anywhere else, the unrecognized contributions and work of adolescent girls are essential to household and community enterprise. They work alongside their mothers and family members to earn the livelihood for the household. They care for younger siblings and older family members. They prepare food and take care of domestic chores. Girls and women on average handle huge percentage of all household works in the developing countries. In all regions of the world, women work longer hours than men. With education, support, and opportunity, the special power of the developing world (adolescent girls) can be tapped to help reverse the poverty of their people and put nations on the path to greater food security and economic sustainability.

Facebook has been playing an important role in the socio-economic and developmental concerns of the adolescent girls. Intervention of social media especially Facebook for adolescent girls' empowerment is evolving in the country and it has become a major tool to promote the developmental process of urban slums. NGO's and other social organization are using Facebook to attract attention of masses in this perspective. In these circumstances it is very essential to explore how NGOs engaged in adolescent girls' empowerment, utilizing social network specially Facebook to promote their work and to connect to a larger audience. It is also essential to explore how NGOs get support for their work related to adolescent girls empowerment through intervention of social media specially Facebook.

Objectives

The objective of the study is to explore how NGOs engaged in adolescent girls empowerment, utilizing social network specially Facebook to promote their work and to connect to a larger audience.

Methodology

The case study of activities of an NGO, "Jan Vikas Sansthan" and its effort through social media especially Facebook are adopted to explore the intervention of social media on adolescent girls empowerment. This case study is based on the hand-on experience of the researcher who was the coordinator of the said NGO's activities on the Facebook. "Jan Vikas Sansthan" has been working for the educational, cultural and social enrichment of the socio-economically backward girls at Vasant Vihar (an urban unauthorized colony), Mumfordganj, Prayagraj, Uttar Pradesh.

Social Media Activism and Public Sphere

Social media like Facebook is now recognized as a powerful tool for social transformation at the global level. These Web 2.0 tools were used effectively for spreading the social awareness for the societal development. Social media shifted the focus of attention from the celebrity in the traditional media to the masses (the citizen journalist) without any formal journalism training uploading raw data and interacting with peers in the public sphere of Web 2.0. Amateur experiences, videos, photographs and music have never reached so much audience before. This reach translates into the power to influence and the interactivity of the social networking sites makes the creator or sharer of the information directly accessible for comment.

Social network sites are Web-based services that allow individuals to construct a public or semi-public profile, create a list of others users with whom they share a connection, and view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system (Boyd and Ellison, 2008). The discourses gain great momentum in this public sphere where agendas are set and immediate reaction is available. The widespread generation and consumption of content has created

an online space which competes for limited attention of the user community. Gaining attention forms just the first step and when action follows that content, we reach digital media activism.

Sandor Vega's classified online activism which includes awareness/advocacy and organization /mobilization. First, when it comes to awareness and advocacy, the Web allows a social movement to bypass traditional media gatekeepers. Second, the internet facilitates organization and mobilization by three means: a) calling for offline action via email or a Website, b) calling for online action for something typically done offline, such as sending emails to Congress members instead of letters, and c) calling for online action that is possible only via the internet.

Schussman and Earl (2004) criticized much of the existing literature, maintaining it was faulty to conclude the internet was not creating new modes of activism when most research was based on the ways in which already existing social movement organizations were incorporating Web-based techniques, rather than examining movements born online. This study answers their concern, examining how Facebook comments helped push an online awareness campaign offline. The group attracts thousands of members and plays a prominent role in spreading and bringing attention to the concerned issue. This has a snowballing effect with the news spreading through social media like Facebook.

Sociology's major theoretical traditions emphasize different aspects of electronic media. For Durkheimians, point-to-point communications media like telephones reinforce organic solidarity, while broadcast media like radio or television yield powerful collective representations (Alexander 1988). Other traditions also offer perspectives on the digital media. Technological determinists suggest that structural features of new media induce social change by enabling new forms of communication and cultivating distinctive skills and sensibilities (McLuhan 1967, Eisenstein 1979). In the 1960s, students of social change suggested that in the face of new developments in communications technology, industrial society would yield to the "information society," with consequences in every institutional realm (Machlup 1962, Bell 1973).

Much online public interaction involves participation in virtual communities: cyber-groups based upon people connecting with others who share similar values, interests and concerns in order to exchange information, gain companionship and provide emotional support (Wellman and Gulia 1999). Online deliberations have to identify factors inhibiting an extension of such communication to ensure an ideal public sphere discourse (Dahlberg, 2001). Social network sites are a space where such deliberations could happen. Re-posts ensure participation of more people in discussing this vital issue thereby creating a wider and more vibrant public sphere where exchange of ideas and real-time interactions happen.

Adolescent Girls Empowerment

Women are central to the development and to national economies. They play a vital yet unrecognized role as they hold the potential to be agents of food and nutritional security and economic growth. In the nations of Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia, women and girls comprise nearly half of the region's total workers. However, less than 10 percent of total official development assistance explicitly addresses gender issues, and only 33 percent of girls of the developing world attend primary school. Women, in particular, have enormous untapped productive capacity that could be transformative if they were reached as adolescent girls, especially with more education. With the same access to resources and decision making as men, they can do wonders. As the international community renews its focus on the importance of economic development, the success of its efforts will be significantly enhanced if it includes a major emphasis on adolescent girls.

To relegate adolescent girls to the bottom of the societal pyramid is to miss a tremendous opportunity to bring down the poverty and hunger in its tracks and set nations on the path to progress.

As leaders consider how best to develop economies, they miss a tremendous opportunity if they do not concentrate specifically on empowering adolescent girls. At the same time, efforts to improve the lives of adolescent girls will be far more successful if they are integrated into an overall, well-supported economic development strategy. The world now has an opportunity to pursue these two goals in tandem, each reinforcing the other and achieving benefits for both girls and society.

Even as adolescent girls have the potential to make immense impact, they are often among the most disadvantaged. The challenges of location, age, and gender often combine to create a triple disadvantage. Girls are frequently undervalued within their societies—their existence, their contributions, and their potentials often given little credence. Adolescent girls commonly bear heavy work burdens. They often fulfill their duties while suffering from malnutrition. They may have little or no time or opportunity for even the most basic education. The doors to productive economic livelihoods are often closed to them. They are vulnerable to harm and may be violated at a young age. Their reproductive roles make them at once powerful forces of change for the next generation and highly susceptible to having their life trajectories derailed. Too often they marry and become pregnant in adolescence, cutting short their own development into healthy, educated, and economically productive adults. In households and communities where hunger and economic hardship prevail, girls are sometimes viewed more as liabilities than assets. Such views are magnified in urban slum areas that are the deepest in poverty, the furthest from centres of economic opportunity and political influence, and frequently the most strongly influenced by customary law and traditional norms.

Efforts to focus attention on adolescent girls largely in the developing world are gaining momentum. These efforts must be sure to reach adolescent girls, who are among the most marginalized, yet have extensive untapped potential to make a difference. They are the mothers of tomorrow with the power to help break the cycle of poverty in the world's most impoverished areas. They are many of the world's current and future farmers, who will help increase the productivity of the land and serve as protectors of precious natural resources. When they grow up, they are the untapped talent pool that will help raise family incomes and lift communities out of poverty through active economic participation. They are decision makers who will help tackle the challenges facing their families, their communities, and their nations. But despite some progress, most women and girls are still struggling. They typically face more obstacles than men in gaining access to public services, social protection, decent employment opportunities, and markets and other institutions. If women have the same access to resources as men, they can increase farm yields. When women empower economically and socially, they become leaders and agents of change for economic growth, social progress and sustainable development as UN Under-Secretary-General and Women Executive Director Michelle Bachelet said “When women are has been empowering and can claim their rights and access to land, leadership, opportunities and choices, economies grow, food security is enhanced and prospects are improved for current and future generations.”

Indeed, if adolescent girls are given a chance, they can do all this and more. They not only have answers for tomorrow, but answers for today. As they gain knowledge, they can teach and train others to read and write, practice better health, and improve farming. They can support their own needs, forming groups to make school uniforms, grow nutritious food, and protect each other from violence. They can use their ingenuity to find time-saving solutions to their daily work. They can become leaders in their communities and advocate for their needs through radio, television, the Internet, and local forums. They can help lead themselves, their families, and their communities toward a more sustainable and prosperous future.

An NGO's Experience

'Jan Vikas Sansthan' is an NGO working for the educational, cultural and social enhancement of the socio-economically backward adolescent girls at Vasant Vihar (an urban unauthorized colony), Mumfordganj, Prayagraj, Uttar Pradesh. NGO has been focusing on the expansion of opportunities for adolescent girls to attend secondary school. A secondary school has been running at Fafamau by the effort of said NGO with the government and public support. The school management has improved educational facilities for the adolescent girls, sets the safety standards, and employed more female teachers to support completion of primary and secondary school. The curriculum has been set according to the need of adolescent girls. The school provides incentive to parents' time-to-time to keep girls in school. The NGO launched a literacy awareness campaign in urban slum areas to increase school enrolment among girls.

The said NGO equipped adolescent girls to become entrepreneurs, workers, and managers in the economy by developing and promoting time-saving technologies like 'Skill Development Programme', 'Earn while Learn Programme' and 'Basic Course for Computer and Internet Learning' so that girls can both attend school and focus on skill development and introduce with ICT tools. JVS Incorporated practical knowledge and skill-building programs into both formal and informal ways to initiate economic development and educational enhancement. 'JVS' with the support of the people made adolescent girls stronger to be major stakeholders in agriculture and natural resource management which increased adolescent girls' access to assets such as financing and agricultural inputs. JVS has been empowering adolescent girls and creating opportunities for them to have an active voice in household, community and decision making.

The NGO empowering girls in such a way that they can offer education, health and adult literacy training to their families and communities and become non-traditional extension agents. We have circulated the press release of each and every activity and made contact with media persons to highlight our attempt but it was not so effective and result oriented. With the above attempt we have created an account on Facebook in a name 'Jan Vikas Sansthan' and posted photos, videos and other information's about every activities of the said NGO. Through the social media especially Facebook we have got good response and used snowball technique for this page to network dedicated and supportive people from every section of the society. After few weeks the online awareness campaigning got momentum and many social workers, media persons, MLA's, MP's, Professors and students of the Allahabad University and degree colleges offered their service and supported us for this noble cause. We have pursued some of university students and other boys to act as a volunteers and gave them training which includes posting of photos, videos and other information's about the activities of our NGO on Facebook. The page becomes very popular and emerged as a connecting bridge between masses and the urban elites. NGO has generated fund with the help of the online awareness campaign and several hands came forward to help us for the economic, governmental and administrative support. The campaign got huge success with the help of social media especially Facebook.

JVS has been initiating youth development programs (for boys and girls combined) to build confidence and skills, develop peer connections, and provide mentoring. This programme has become a Supportive platform for girls to participate in public dialogue and develop civic leadership skills. JVS has been providing adolescent girls with comprehensive health information and services time-to-time by arranging free medical camps in their own place. It has become possible because some of the doctors offered their free service after interacting with page of JVS and seeing the related posts about the activities of the NGO on Facebook. The NGO also spreading awareness and educating men and boys about the value of girls to improve adolescent girls' safety and security and educating girls on existing laws and offer services which leads to transformational change. JVS created the opportunity to the girls' to access the information through internet and other media tools like radio and television.

The NGO started a computer centres equip with internet facility for the adolescent girls and offered them training programme which includes posting of photos, videos and other information's about the activities of our NGO on Facebook.

Conclusion

The overwhelming amount of information, opinion and emotions in the form of text, images and videos flowing among users of Facebook gave them an opportunity to be informed firsthand about the developments and participate virtually in the campaign. This study reveals that Facebook played a great role in initiating, organizing and executing a powerful social awareness campaign headed by people. The discourse proves this fact and also ascertains the power of the common man aided with nothing but technology in creating a new system. It was not the effort of celebrities or politicians that led to the success of this social awareness campaign. It was an effort by the common man who used the possibilities of virtual interaction to bring together, conspire which spilled out into the real world and vice versa that made success of this social awareness campaign. Another vital learning from this paper is that Facebook evolves as an effective 'word of mouth' tool for advertising and promoting NGO's social activities.

The study also explores condition of adolescent girls living in poor economies and their potential to become agents of social and economic change. It offers evidence, examples, and a road map for online social awareness campaign and reveals the new vistas of strategies and approaches of social media intervention in the field of adolescent girls' empowerment.

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