The complexity of community engagement: Developing staff-community relationships in a participatory intervention to reduce domestic violence in Kolkata slums.

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Dissatisfaction with inflexible top-down development interventions that have failed to meet the needs of communities has led to a demand for more community-centred approaches and the proliferation of terms such as participation, empowerment and community ownership (Cornwall, 2008). However, the practical implications of these terms remain unclear (Chambers, Pettit, & Scott-Villiers, 2000). Community ownership is a difficult concept to grasp and can be understood in different ways. In the context of this study, community ownership was understood to involve communities in the development of interventions that are relevant to their needs and aspirations.

Method & Context

Shikha is an NGO which runs non-governmental, women's rights groups, health clinics and vocational training programmes in 14 villages in South East Kolkata. This paper focuses on the establishment of a women's rights group in Rajea.

Rajea is a village of approximately 80 families based on a city dump. It is not served by government systems for water, sanitation or health care. People are poor and live in their homes.

Shikha faced significant community resistance when they first attempted to establish a school and women's rights group in the area. Within 2 years, however, they had supported a group of women to reduce domestic violence and to successfully lobby the government to provide safe water and to close illegal liquor shops in the area. They continue to campaign to obtain electricity.

Methodology

A thematic Network Analysis (Attride-Stirling, 2001) identified 59 basic codes which were clustered into 11 organizing themes and five encompassing global themes. These are presented in Table 2.

Findings

Power Dynamics

Power struggles between staff and community members were manifest in conflict and resistance ranging from suspicious stares to insults, taunts and even death threats.

Community members had little or no experience of others taking an interest in their wellbeing and the social change agenda and participatory group formation provoked a lot of scepticism. 

Building Relationships

Building relationships was a slow and unpredictable process. It was often fuelled by unanticipated events such as teachers spontaneously responding to community emergencies, going beyond their responsibilities to help people who were injured or ill. They arranged transport, paid for medical treatment and donated blood. “This made our position stronger in the hearts of these people” (Mila, teacher). Some felt that formal relationships were key to gaining acceptance, for example, by playing with community children and avoiding an air of superiority.

Women found it difficult to relate to the values and terminology that were being espoused by Shikha staff.

When we started discussing these issues like women’s rights and domestic violence, I realised that they are not all familiar with this kind of language, these terminologies and coinages. They didn’t even know what the word “rights” meant in the first place, let alone having them… We were trying to speak the language, but the very concepts we were trying to advocate were sort of alien to them. (Uly, women’s group facilitator)

Some staff were uncomfortable with community lobbies. They commented on a lack of personal hygiene, inappropriate clothing and that parents didn’t care about their children, “at least not as much as we do” (Geeta, teacher).

My strategy was that I would make [the literary teacher] narrate some of the stories to them, not myself… Finally when they started asking repeatedly about me, he said, “No, she’s been really hurt by your behaviour. You could also bring about the developments that are going on elsewhere in your own communities. But it seems you are not at all interested.” But gradually their view of domestic violence as something like an “insult” to the man, “No please tell her to come, we did not mean to misbehave.” They had realised that whatever I was discussing with them was for their own good. (Uly, women’s group facilitator)

Using one’s position of authority to manipulate individuals “for their own good” is a controversial approach. Though highly paternalistic, it was ultimately used to bring about positive change where more information-provision and negotiation were ineffective.

Unstable Progress

Through storytelling and by bringing the women to visit other successful women’s self-help groups Shikha stimulated community women to make social comparisons with others and to think critically about their own situations.

What we thought was, if others can cope with this situation why not us? Then, we women thought that if the men can’t then we will have to take care of the whole thing. (Sarita, women’s group member)

However, when the women began to act on this new sense of purpose things did not go smoothly. As one staff member put it, they became “broad dynamic” (Uly, women’s group facilitator), vandalising liquor shops and physically threatening violent men themselves. This caused a backlash of criticism and violence within the community.

These women here tend to do is immediately go… they apply everything that they have learnt regarding the gender issues… [but] If one fine morning she suddenly goes home and tells her husband, “No, you can’t beat me anymore,” then he will shout at her womanly… She started calling me for help. I said let them do whatever they are doing now, because at this stage they have gone out of my hands. [Eventually] we said “Before demolishing the liquor shops… we have to give a thought to who the people are that you would be harming in the process and how socially powerful they are? You could have been murdered… You have actually invited more problems by acting in this stupid manner” (Uly, women’s group facilitator).

Lily’s reaction demonstrates the emotional nature of field work which adds another layer of unreliability to the development process. Staff do not simply implement technical plans. They constantly use their personal discretion and judgement to respond to community activities.

Some staff felt very alarmed by what they perceived as iniquity or opportunism among community members.

They only come when it’s their own need. Like one of them had some trouble regarding banking so he came to us for help but once we did it for him he never came back. (Ashoka, teacher)

Successfully coping with these emotional situations depends on positive relationship management. As a self-admitted volunteer, “I think it always boils down to the one-on-one thing and in a way that’s scary because you’re dealing with the flaws of human nature and personalities. It’s not just about having the most technical or elaborate plans.” (Elaine, volunteer)