

"A man is
great by
deeds, not by
birth"

-Chanakya

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Case Study

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Do Community Based Organizations (CBOs) ensure equality for women and marginalized groups or maintain status quo? The case of Jalanidhi, Kerala

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Do Community Based Organizations (CBOs) ensure equality for women and marginalized groups or maintain status quo? The case of Jalanidhi, Kerala

The sudden jerk of the bus stopping at the hospital entrance woke Kumari up from her slumber. She had travelled fifteen kilometers to get an anti-rabies injection, having been bitten by a dog when she went to read the meter for monthly water usage in a house at her village. Waiting for her turn to meet the duty doctor, her thoughts wandered back to the time when she, a Tribal woman was elected as the first President of the Beneficiary Group (BG) that managed a Jalanidhi water scheme. A time of elation not just for her but also for all the women in her village, Kumari reminisced the pride they shared on being the first woman to hold a position of office in their community-based water management project. Interestingly, women were elected to all the key positions in the executive committee and two men had to be 'included' to make the committee gender inclusive! As days passed by the enormity of the responsibility entrusted on her had become evident to Kumari. For the past few years, she had meticulously managed all the operations of the water scheme including pumping water, cleaning the overhead tank regularly with the help of other BG members. One year into operation when the treasurer, a young woman in her twenties got married and relocated from the village, her job of reading the water meters of all the member households, collecting the monthly water charges and managing accounts were added to Kumari's list of responsibilities. Most being barely literate, other women members could not pitch in to share Kumari's responsibilities. AS BG President, she had to also ensure that the motor was fixed within hours when it developed a snag and a broken pipe was attended to soon enough to minimize water leakage and loss.

But the relentless responsibility also meant that she could hardly take up other remunerative activities including daily wage work under MGNREGA, the government run employment guarantee scheme that paid Rs 250/- for a day's labor. The only concession that came with the responsibility was the trust and confidence which village folk had in her capability to ensure regular and adequate water supply, a small comfort for volunteering to lead the BG that had a token INR¹ 1000/- a month as recognition, making it very tough to make ends meet even though unmarried and no family to support. More than once she had tried to step down from the position and hand over responsibility to another, but no other woman and absolutely no man was willing to step in. Why such reluctance to volunteer for a project that had filled dry taps and drenched parched throats with sweet water in one's own village?

¹ Indian Rupee (INR) 75.60 equals USD 1 (one) as on May 1, 2020.

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