

## Abstract

India's phenomenal economic growth rate often overshadows the alarming fact that poverty affects approximately 70% of its population, much of which is located in rural areas. Women most often feel the impacts of poverty, whether it be culturally, politically, or socially. (Pant, 2005) Among many things I observed in the rural town of Bagar, most notable are its economic stagnation and women's low stature in society. The purpose of this paper is to document the progress I have made in the areas of livelihoods and women's empowerment in Bagar, Rajasthan. Specifically, I was able to work towards combating these issues simultaneously by creating a women's group that is collectively taking up an income generating activity.

This case study is meant for future volunteers on this project, the *Grassroots Development Laboratory*, who feel that the creation of other Self Help Groups (SHGs, from hereon after)<sup>1</sup> fit into our project's mandate. It is also for the countless NGOs that have taken up women's rights as a cause and embrace the SHG model as a vehicle toward this goal but find only scant records of what it takes to form, operate, manage, and sustain an SHG. While the SHG I have created is not yet self-sufficient, the lessons learned to date are telling and should be shared. Therefore, this paper will track the progress of my SHG, illustrating the lessons learned from my pitfalls, as well as the strategies that worked from my successes.

The paper provides a background of the institutional and environmental contexts within which I work. It goes on to describe the initial months of the project that were solely focused on the needs assessment process. Following this, the paper documents what had to be considered in order to create the group. The subsequent section on operating the SHG is telling in terms of attempts made and lessons learned. In the section on management of the SHG, the paper elucidates how abstract concepts critical to the functioning of the group were instilled as well as how the more concrete tasks such as the construction of the vermicompost shed were managed. There is also a discussion about the direction of the group and a manner in which the livelihood can be sustained, in the *Next Steps and Sustainability* section. The paper concludes by making clear that there is no one-size-fits-all operating technique for SHGs based on diversity of contexts but that the experiences documented should be considered when starting an SHG in any setting.

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<sup>1</sup> See Appendix A