

‘It is *only* women’ to ‘it is *women*’: How poor women gained legitimacy as economic and social actors through a grass root social innovation



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Motivation for this paper



- Social exclusion = Refusal to recognise marginalised groups as legitimate social, political and economic actors (Narayan et al., 2000)
- Research on social innovations for inclusion of marginalised actors –
 - Focuses on how those initiatives have gained legitimacy among other social/institutional actors (e.g. Mair & Marti, 2009, Tracey, Phillips & Jarvis, 2011),
 - Less exploration of how the initiatives helped beneficiaries gain legitimacy for themselves

Theoretical framework



- **Legitimacy & legitimation**

- *Legitimacy as property of an entity* - “something is legitimate if it is in accord with the norms, values, beliefs, practices, and procedures accepted by a group.” (Zelditch, 2001, p. 33)
- *Legitimacy as a social process* - “process by which cultural accounts from a larger social framework in which a social entity is nested are construed to explain and support the existence of that social entity, whether that entity be a group, a structure of inequality, a position of authority, or a social practice” (Berger et al. 1998, p. 380 - based on theory on legitimation of informal status hierarchies).

Theoretical framework



- **Legitimacy of status hierarchies**
 - How inequality is construed as proper - actors have referential beliefs about the social categories or types of people (e.g., those from higher status social groups, the more able, and the more successful) that typically hold higher status positions in interpersonal influence hierarchies in society (Della Fave, 1980)
 - When these referential beliefs are evoked in a situation by the characteristics of the actors present, they create implicit expectations for the types of social actors that will become influential in the situation (Ridgeway & Berger, 1986)

Theoretical framework



- “Legitimation is a process that brings the unaccepted into accord with accepted norms, values, beliefs, practices, and procedures” – (Zelditch, 2001, p.9)
- Stages in legitimation process (Johnson, Dowd & Ridgeway, 2006)
 1. Innovation
 2. Local validation
 3. Diffusion
 4. General validation

Purpose of our research



- To understand the process by which a socially innovative initiative changes the perceptions of legitimacy of their beneficiaries as social, economic and political actors.

Case overview



- Kudumbashree (KS) - a poverty eradication initiative started by the state government of Kerala, India in 1998.
- Targets family level poverty, but women as the beneficiary representative for each family
- Women organised into a network of Community Based Organisations (CBO)
- Focuses 3 domains - economic empowerment, social empowerment and women's empowerment.
- Current membership - 4.11 million women (Kudumbashree National Resource Organisation, 2015).

Data collection



- Sources of data
 - A sample of 80+ individual narratives written by participant women, collected as part of *Pustaka Yatra* (Journey of Books)
 - Interviews and focus groups of women from neighbourhood groups
 - Pictorial descriptions of women about changes they perceive in their status at home and gender dynamics with their respective husbands (Ongoing)

Data analysis



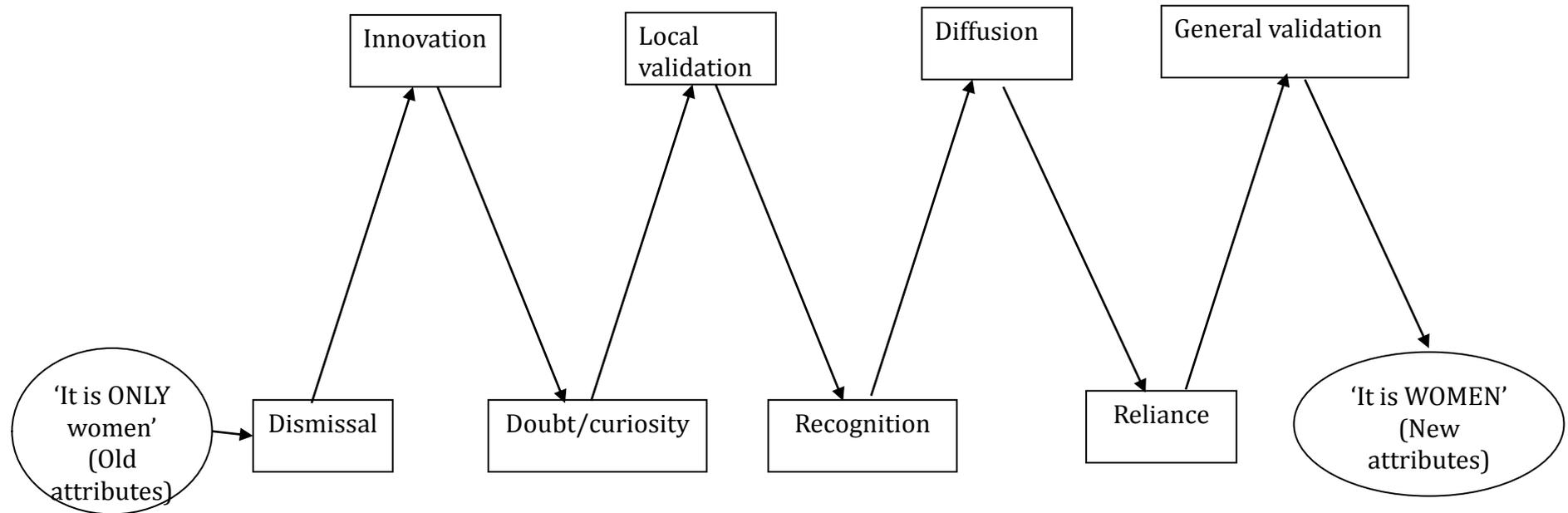
- Primary thematic analysis of interviews – Identification of stages of changes in perceptions
- Detailed thematic analysis of narratives, interviews of participant women and interviews of spouses/partners/family/community members/representatives of banks & local government (Ongoing)

Findings



Status attribute of relevance – ‘Gender’

(Re)Legitimation process (kick-started by KS)



Phases of change to the legitimacy attributed to the status characteristic

(i.e. ‘poor women’)

Findings



- **Spread of KS**

1. Innovation – Pilot & rolling out at local level – Enrolling women & getting them started on various programmes
2. Local validation – Acceptance & success at local level among families, community, local institutional actors
3. Diffusion – Concerted efforts to consolidate success at regional/state levels
4. General validation – Recognition of KS as a successful model among institutional actors at state/national levels, media & general public

Findings



- ‘Dismissal’ - Benign/intentional disregard of their agency
 - *When women gathered on Sundays for Kudumbashree meetings the menfolk would say.....oh you are going for the Kalahasree, (a play upon the word Kudumbashree with the meaning ‘quarrel’ sree.)*
- ‘Doubt’ - Mild curiosity/serious doubts about their capabilities
 - *Wherever we went we were greeted with sarcasm... a “let’s see attitude” and insinuations about our ability to understand and accomplish anything.*

Findings



- ‘Recognition’ - Noticing their success, and as a result, abilities such as financial management, grass root reach etc.
 - *“Kudumbashree members are given a chair in the panchayat on their arrival. I would make a visit on occasions and would be heard and my opinions sought . That is the practice.”*
- ‘Reliance’ – Dependence on them for achieving own/common economic/social goals (e.g. husbands approaching wives who are KS members for faster loans, banks approaching KS women with more favourable loan offers, government departments requesting for the help of KS women in implementing their own their own grassroots level programmes).
 - *I say, “I am going” don’t even ask for permission. That is a huge change from the earlier times when I had to get permission to go outside. We become capable of working for our families, They cant do without us...*

Implications



- For theory –
 - Contributes to the scant literature on legitimation of excluded actors
- For practice –
 - Has this legitimation process created
 - Greater inclusion?
 - True equality?

Let's discuss



Questions/Comments/Observations?

Thank you!