

Building agency through participatory video: insights from the experiences of young women participants in India

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Abstract

Participatory video (PV) is being used by several nongovernment organizations (NGOs) in many different countries. It is often assumed to be a non-problematic process that enables less powerful groups to gain power and participate in social change. While scholars have for long critiqued participatory approaches, it is only in recent years that academic and professional debates that challenge assumptions about PV have emerged. This paper adds to those debates, while focusing primarily on critiquing the PV practice. Drawing on the concepts of participation, agency, and gender, it examines how the agency of less powerful groups can be affected over a period of time as they participate in PV projects initiated by NGOs. It discusses these issues through a case study of a long-term PV project done with young women in a community in Hyderabad (India), undertaken during a doctoral research. It draws attention to the several aspects of a long-term PV project that impact agency-development. The paper argues that while PV can enable participants to gain agency, it is equally challenging to do so in the presence of power relations.

Introduction

Participatory video (PV) has been gaining in popularity as both a subject of academic study and an area of professional practice (Milne, 2016). PV has a long and varied history (High, Singh, Petheram, & Nemes, 2012), but essentially community members are involved in video-making in various capacities to investigate, capture, and present certain issues that they are concerned about. The use of PV by non-government organizations (NGOs) has been becoming increasingly popular across the world. NGOs have used PV to highlight community perspectives on climate change, gender violence, governance issues, and violation of human rights, amongst several others. Several scholars too have used PV as a participatory action research method and critiqued it (Pithouse, Mitchell, & Weber, 2009; Stewart, Riecken, Scott, Tanaka, & Riecken, 2008). However, not many have presented understandings about PV practice. In particular, there is very limited literature on the impacts of participation in long-term PV projects on less powerful groups. The doctoral study, on which this paper is based, was conducted to address this gap by researching the PV practice of NGOs. This paper presents the findings from one of the case studies examined in the thesis (Singh, 2014).

The research focused on young women participants of long-term PV projects. In such projects, often a few community members are selected as participants and trained in the process of video-making by an external trainer. They produce several videos that capture local social issues, and are meant as a trigger for community action and social change. Other than the change that the videos trigger, the PV process itself aims to enable participants to become 'agents of change'. However, participation in such projects might not be without challenges. Questions such as who participates, what parts of the process they participate in, and how their agency is built, become critical.

The above mentioned questions are delved into in this paper by bringing together critiques of participatory approaches and discussions on agency. Further, a gender lens has been adopted to understand the experiences of young women participants. Several scholars have argued that community development projects are invariably driven by the strategies and agendas of donors and governments, and participation of community merely becomes a means to meet those pre-determined agendas (Cooke & Kothari, 2001; Narayanan, 2003; Parfitt, 2004; Puri, 2004). Some scholars suggest that current notion of participation in development has failed to help understand power relations in communities and between different actors in participatory projects, and therefore has not been transformative (Parfitt, 2004; Williams, 2004; Gaventa, 2004; Hickey & Mohan, 2004). Some have directly linked participation to people's agency (Gaventa, 2004; Pellissery & Bergh, 2007), which we have found matters significantly in practice, as discussed later.

It has been noted that the participation of the most marginalized groups in development processes is often limited by oppressive structures within communities (Guijt & Shah, 1998). So, even where a long-term PV project is implemented in a community, more powerful groups may dominate the project or limit participation of the less powerful members. The domination may become more significant in case of young women, since as Syed (2010, p. 284) notes: 'The position of gender in societies is usually one of women's disempowerment and disadvantage to their male counterparts'. Therefore, young women might face challenges while participating in a long-term PV project. More importantly, it may influence their ability 'to do' and 'to be' what they value, i.e. their agency (Sen, 2000). The paper looks at how the agency of young women participants got impacted from the time they joined the project, till they got trained and produced videos on a regular basis. It presents impacts over the course of several years and phases of a long-term PV project implemented by an NGO called Mahita in Hyderabad, India.

Research context and methodological process

Mahita is based in the old city of Hyderabad. This part of the city is predominantly occupied by Muslims living in slums, with poor infrastructure and facilities. Here, lower levels of education, poor

health facilities, and early marriages are some of the issues faced by women. Mahita promotes education amongst children, especially girl children, as an important way of bringing about social changes. Their focus has been on working with young women and developing their livelihood skills. The long-term PV project was designed to empower adolescent girls through media production skills. The participants were trained in PV for a period of one year. They made videos while they were trained, learning through their own experiences. After the initial training period of one year, they made 18 videos in succession between 2009 and 2012, on topics ranging from school infrastructure to female foeticide and early marriage. These young women were also paid a monthly stipend for participating in the project. The data for the research was collected in 2011–2012, over a period of eight months. During this time, the participants were making videos on their own – with limited support from video trainers.

Being one of the very few organizations implementing a long-term PV project and with a strong gender focus, Mahita provided the right opportunity to conduct the study. The key participants in the research were the young women participating in the long-term PV project. The focus was on understanding their perspectives and drawing information from their experiences to generate knowledge. The research was conducted with eight of them, all of whom were between 16 and 18 years of age. Almost all of them had dropped out of school and were doing short-term courses with Mahita, such as basic computers, henna designing, and tailoring. Their own stories that they offered have been used as data, to build an evidence-based study (Sapsford & Jupp, 1996). The other participants in this research were Mahita staff members closely involved with the project, including the program director of the organization, the program manager, the coordinator of the PV project, and the video trainer.

The research methods used for the primary data collection were participant observation, interviews, group discussions, and participatory videos. Using multiple methods helped in maintaining rigor and gathering multiple perspectives. Participant observation was chosen as a method of investigation for this research because it is particularly useful for studying processes and the context in which they happen (Jorgensen, 1989). It allowed us to observe the daily activities of the participants once they came to Mahita office and began their work day. The observations provided an insight into how they discussed concepts of videos, developed the scripts, undertook shoots and editing, and participated in screenings of videos. The observations also helped us refine our interview guides. The interviews with the young women participants helped us learn about their personal background and subjective experiences of their journey through the PV process. Their personal narratives of experiences brought in their perspectives on agency-development. Semi-structured interviews with other

participants were conducted to build a complete picture of the process, which the key participants could not have provided, such as the initiation of the project, and get multiple perspectives.

Group discussions were held after the interviews, focusing on issues shared by the key participants that emerged from the interviews, for instance, power negotiation at the household-level. PV was another method used in this research. PV is regarded as an effective tool for participatory research, in which participants can gain control over the research process (Kendon, 2003). It was chosen in this research since participants were proficient in producing videos, and found it comfortable using it to express their views. What follows is a theme-based description and discussion of the main findings from the Mahita case.

Participatory video, gender, and agency

In India, one of the earliest PV projects was Video SEWA in the 1980s. Self-employed women in the informal sector were trained in making videos on their issues, to bring them to the attention of policy-makers (Singhal & Devi, 2003). In 1998, the Deccan Development Society started a participatory video project with rural women farmers to bring out their issues and to advocate on pertinent policy matters (Satheesh, 1998). There have been several such PV projects not just in India but across the world, where women have been the video producers.

When women become part of PV projects, gender, and its manifestations can play an important role. Scholars observe that gender norms often foster identity development in men and women, and also act as a guide on how to behave, act, think, or feel (Keleher & Franklin, 2008; Mahalik et al., 2005). Rodriguez (1994) has argued that during video-making women often step out of their traditional role. When they produce a story, they are the ones 'directing' rather than men, thus altering gender roles. Some researchers have sought to understand how producing participatory video drama enables women to explore power relations and express themselves (Brickell, 2014; Waite & Conn, 2011). Some studies on PV with women have shown how by the end of the PV projects, women had gained more voice and confidence, and raised social issues (Bery & Stuart, 1996; Khamis, Plush, & Sepulveda Zelaya, 2009). Others have argued that they can present their opinions and perspectives through video (Einsiedal, 1996; Kawaja, 1994; Protz, 1998). Protz (1994) also suggests that since PV can encourage less powerful and marginalized groups such as women to challenge hierarchical power relations, it can also affect the way they perceive and represent themselves.

While much of the literature has been positive about the impact of PV projects, very few delve deep into the negotiations that women have to do to gain more agency. Sen (1999, p. 19) defines agency

as ‘the ability to pursue goals one values and has the reason to value’. Kabeer (1999) argues that the ability to exercise change comprises three inter-related dimensions: resources as the preconditions, agency as the process, and achievements as the outcomes. The preconditions indicate that exercising agency is not simply an individual’s choice, and that material, social, and institutional factors have an influence on it (Frediani, 2010; Ibrahim & Alkire, 2007). There are various gender norms and stereotypes in India, often a product of the interplay amongst the caste, class, and religious structures that exist in the local contexts and can influence the agency of young women. They may face complexities while challenging gender norms in their local contexts, such as around education, mobility, and employment, which may prevent them from building their agency. The following sections explore the complexities young women may face when they use PV as a medium ‘to do’ and ‘to be’ what they value.

Who gets to participate? Gender power relations at the community and household level

As mentioned in the introduction, Guijt and Shah (1998) have suggested that power relations exist between different groups within a community, which can suppress the participation of less powerful groups. Tacchi and Kiran (2008, p. 68) argue that participation in media initiatives is inherently complex because of multiple factors, such as gender, caste, ethnicity, religion, and political factors shaping behaviours. Within the community itself, community leaders or parents/family members of the participants may sometimes take up the role of gatekeepers and restrict the organization from running a project, or limit the participation of other community members. In the community where Mahita was working, there were several gender-based issues. These included early marriage, limited or no livelihood options for women and highly restricted mobility. Mahita sought to invite participation from young women, recognized by the organization as members of a group which was least ‘heard’, but had the most potential to engage in local social change processes.

Ramesh Reddy, Mahita’s Program Director, mentioned that initially, some religious leaders also questioned why such a project was being done with young women. The organization had to take these religious leaders into confidence about the purpose of the project before they could begin. Getting young women to participate was not easy either for the organization or the participants. In an environment where young women had limited agency, it was an extremely difficult decision for these young participants to be in a project that required them to work outside their homes, as the quote below suggests:

I have been working with this community for 12 years now. This is a very conservative community, and for the girls to be able to do anything like this is a huge step. Nitin, program manager, in a personal interview.

However, it was not just the gender power relations at the larger community level, it was also the nature of power relations at the household level that restricted these young women. Most of the participants in these projects had been asked to drop out before entering senior school or college by their parents and were restricted within their household space. Some participants, who had joined initially, quit the project on their own accord, knowing that they would not be allowed to participate in something which required them to work outdoors. Parents of several participants forced them to withdraw after coming to know about the nature of the project. The NGO staff members had to go to the houses of the participants who had quit to convince the parents and motivate the participants to stay on. In a way, the NGO was providing its staff as resources to support participants' agency.

On the other hand, some participants took their own decision to join the project without informing their families. This concurs with Agarwal's (1997) argument that women's overt compliance does not mean that they have accepted the inequality within their household as legitimate but it might be linked to their lack of options. Women may instead use covert ways as a form of resistance. Here young women were showing their resistance to power relations in their household, by continuing to participate in the project without the knowledge of other household members. This also went to show that participants had 'situated agency', i.e. they had some agency, however restricted (see Peter, 2003), even before they joined the project. This data showed that participation in these PV projects could help the young women to further develop their existing agency, if they are provided resources and opportunities.

Many participants who had stayed on and participated in this research stated that they could sometimes discuss their participation with their mothers but not their fathers. Several of them also mentioned that their brothers objected to their participation and controlled their mobility, even when both parents agreed to their participation – in some cases the brothers being younger in age than the participant. This implies that gender played an important role in determining who had more power within the household. Gender power relations determined that some of the young women could not participate. For the rest, it required immense effort and negotiation, both by the organization's staff members and the participants. From the initial 30 women who had shown interest, only about 12 were able to continue. The paper suggests that while all the participants had prior situated agency, which was reflected in their interest in participating in the PV project, some could exercise it to be able to participate, whereas the others could not due to the existing oppressive patriarchal structure.

Restricted mobility and gendered roles

For those young women who did join the project despite a gendered environment both in their households and community, it was just the beginning of negotiation of the existing gender norms and stereotypes. Before joining the PV project, several of the Mahita participants were not allowed to go out of their houses at all, and if they did, they had to be accompanied by either a family member or a friend. They also needed to be back home by early evening. It was a huge challenge to participate in a project that required them to come to the NGO office daily, work for five to six hours, go out in their community for research, and filming with the camera that required taking off their veil in public. Due to such severe restrictions, many of the young women were initially apprehensive about going out in the field and preferred to film inside the office. The following quote provides an example of their concerns about filming:

I did not tell my family for very long that I am doing this. I used to say I am going to the computer center. I would keep a watch on the time and when I knew my brother has left for work, only then would I step out for shooting. I myself feared going out with the camera.
Reshma, participant, in a personal interview.

The participants were constantly harassed by boys and often by other community members. Sometimes even when the family members wanted to allow the participants to work in the project, it was difficult for them to defy the prevalent norms. As another participant noted:

He (my brother) said that even if he and the family gave permission, his friends would say that 'your sister was there!' A lot of street sexual harassment happens here, and if something happens then what will he do? This was the problem. Yasmeen, participant, in a personal interview.

The women's mobility was also restricted by specific gender roles. For instance, several participants mentioned in their interviews that they were supposed to spend their time in household work. Conflicts arose in some of their homes – since the participants could not devote as much time to those. Such work is primarily seen as a woman's responsibility, and becomes a source of conflict if women try to get out of it. If poor women take up employment, they do not have the choice of cutting down on their time or effort spent on household work (Gillard, Howcroft, Mitev, & Richardson, 2008), whereas these participants were giving preference to work outside their homes. The nature of their work challenged some more gender norms and stereotypes, which the next section delves into.

The technology and image challenge

Participants had to challenge another gender norm around women handling cameras and computers. It had two facets – how women ‘should be seen’ in public spaces and what kind of work they should be engaged in. A few participants said that they themselves were apprehensive about working with computers or the camera at first. They felt that as a girl they would not be able to handle them. Sanders (2005) explains that often because of the gender stereotypes perpetuated by several sources, such as parents, society, and the media, girls associate less with computers and may be less confident about operating them. Both men and women conventionally hold the perception that women are not good with technology (Williams, 2006). It also establishes a norm in which women are not encouraged to take up technology related work, which is seen as more masculine. The interviews revealed that when the participants started working with technology, they also started recognizing that they had the required skills and were defying the stereotypes. They found themselves doing things that they had seen only those more powerful (because of their gender, class, education, and so on) do; they were developing their agency by ‘doing what they valued’.

Besides doing work that is often seen as men’s domain, the participants also started representing themselves in public spaces differently. Desai and Andrist (2010) describe the performance of gender, where the focus is on the symbolic nature of gender – individuals adopt a gendered behaviour, which becomes a visible display of their gender. The performances may include, for instance, women observing *purdah* (Note 1), wearing veils, or going to public spaces only accompanied by male members. In Mahita’s case, not only were the young women going around the community (challenging norms around mobility), but also using a camera (defying gender stereotypes) while taking their veil off (ignoring the required gender display).

Protz (1998) points out that video is commonly viewed as a powerful medium in many communities and though using it can have positive effects, it can also cause jealousy and conflict. As mentioned above, the Mahita participants were often harassed when they were seen with the camera and boys would threaten to break their equipment. In the focus group discussion with the participants, they reported that they were often told that it was not a woman’s job to handle cameras. The women participants believed that if men went out with cameras, they would not face such issues.

The burqa worn by these participants as a ‘performance of their gender’ also featured in many of the conversations at the research site. They often had to face ‘comments’ from their community members that because they were wearing a burqa, they should not be filming. It was seen as inappropriate for mainly two reasons.

First, while 'appearing' to be women, they were still performing masculine roles in a public space. Second, while still wearing a burqa and following Islam, they were doing something (working with cameras) that was presumed to be 'un-Islamic':

In the Muslim culture here, TV and camera are seen as sin. Sometimes people taunt us because of that too. Shakeera, participant, in a group discussion.

The participants themselves though felt proud and encouraged that they could step out of their homes, film with cameras, and interact openly with both men and women, something they were not allowed to do earlier:

Yes, the important thing is that being girls we can still do this. People would earlier say, 'How can these girls do this kind of work?' But we are now doing things that even boys don't do. We are bringing a lot of change. Shakeela, participant, in a group discussion.

The PV process adopted by Mahita had certain aspects inherent in it, such as filming outdoors in the community and interviewing community members. While doing so, the participants could begin to navigate the gender norms around their mobility, roles, image, and work. It is argued that in a PV process, participants can start developing a sense of their agency and feel that they could gain more power to ultimately affect local social change. However, this is not without its challenges, since the participants have to overcome the stereotypes they sometimes themselves adhere to, while also trying to defy the same stereotypes and notions in public.

Beginning of power negotiations

Freire (1972, p. 32) describes the process of 'conscientization', where the oppressed should first recognize their situation of oppression, understand the oppression they face, and commit themselves to bringing about change. Mahita started such a process with the participants by introducing discussions through workshops on the situations around them and encouraging them to challenge stereotypes through the PV project. As a result of the orientation and training given by the organization, the participants stated during group discussions that their perspective had changed.

While participation in the PV project provided the young women with a way to start negotiating power, access to monetary resources was another important aspect. This was important since access to resources affects claims on power and agency (Kabeer, 1999). The community organizer from Mahita mentioned that many girls were being allowed by the families to participate partly because of the stipend they received. The monetary resources that they brought in helped them negotiate gender power relations too. As Lipman-Blumen (1995, p. 110) notes: 'The basic characteristic of the power process is an on-going negotiation, in which resources figure significantly. Those players who

can bring or withhold valued – better yet, scarce – resources critical to resolving important social tasks tend to tip the power relationship in their own favor.’

Supported by the monetary resource, the participants could leverage their positions within their households. Most of the participants shared the same experience – their families had eventually started supporting their work. When parents understood that the purpose of their video-making was community development, their support and appreciation grew. It also helped that various mainstream media in their city covered their PV project. The participants asserted that their parents even started feeling proud, seeing that the work done by them was being recognized and appreciated by wider society.

Beyond the support of financial resources and media coverage, it was mainly the participants’ conscientization process, which enabled them to continue negotiating. They saw their work through PV as important for initiating change in their communities. They positively affected their position within their families, and even started engaging in decision-making. Participating in decision-making is an important aspect of women’s agency and autonomy (Qizilbash, 2005). The participants reflected on the oppression they faced, and stayed on with the commitment to continue challenging gender norms, to make their positions stronger in their attempt to initiate social change. The group discussion below reflects the same:

Shakeera: *‘We have brought a lot of changes in ourselves’.*

Amreen: *‘We cannot even say what all, it’s a lot’.*

Habeeba: *‘We can take our own decisions now’.*

Shakeela: *‘Yes. Earlier we would always ask someone, are we doing it right or not? We could never take a decision by ourselves’.*

Yasmeen: *‘Now we know what is right and wrong and we ask for what we want. We are now a part of decisions taken at home’.*

For many participants it was extremely significant that they had started participating in decision-making in their household spaces, and could either take their own decisions or affect decisions regarding their lives. This is not to imply that the participants achieved ‘total control’ or complete autonomy, but that they had started exploring the agency they had gained. As participants started negotiating power at the household level, it was reflected in lesser restrictions on their mobility and the confidence in undertaking more powerful roles.

Video topics – gender perspective

During the PV project, the participants were trained in basic video production skills over a period of one year through various week-long workshops. Each workshop was led by the video trainer and focused on one particular aspect of video-making such as storyboarding, interviewing techniques, or using the camera. They made videos as part of the workshop and also as assignments. Once the training period was over, the participants made videos by themselves.

For the participants, being able to address issues critical to them in their videos was of extreme significance. Participants said that they depicted several critical and sensitive matters in their videos, which they felt proud of. There was a realization that they could increase their influence on social problems through them. Hence, raising issues in the videos was important for building their agency. They talked about issues such as their education, their need to gain livelihood skills, gender inequality in their families and so on. Often participants drew on their own experiences and reflected on their own lives while making these videos. The quote from the video trainer at Mahita suggests the same:

The participants were really driven to make films on gender issues. I think that their personal experiences in and around might have forced that kind of a thing. When you have that kind of experience... and they have seen lot of these incidents happen in their lives, in and around. Maybe they thought more about it. I encouraged them to make films on such issues. Anil Pathlavath, video trainer, in a personal interview.

The topics for these videos were selected in several ways: the participants came up with issues concerning them, the organization suggested the topics, or the participants researched with the community to determine development issues. In almost all cases the young women worked with the community to find stories on the selected issue that could be taken up. Brainstorming sessions were conducted within the team and then the topics were finalized.

The participants also raised many gender-based issues in their videos that were otherwise not talked about openly in the community, such as female foeticide, early marriage, and girl child education. This is in agreement with what some scholars suggest, that PV can create opportunities to talk about sensitive matters not discussed in public earlier (Goodsmith, 2007; Molony, Konie, & Goodsmith, 2007). During the data collection, the young women noted that they were able to bring up matters in which a woman's perspective was often ignored:

We talk about very difficult issues with the community, like early marriage... It is so difficult to make people understand this, but it is important that we have started talking about it. Amreen, participant, in a personal interview.

The participants stated that they could gain the ability to bring gender-based issues to public consciousness and start questioning the gender inequality prevalent in their community. Being able to bring up matters, they felt critical was another step in questioning gender norms and asserting themselves. Qizilbash (2005) links agency very closely to a person's freedom to pursue values and goals. It was found that while addressing critical issues, the video has the potential to build participants' agency, it was equally important for them to have the freedom to select their topics.

The program manager, Nitin, said during his interview that he had to negotiate within the organization so that the other staff members would not interfere in the process of deciding topics for videos. They could make suggestions about the video topics, but there was no imposition on the participants. The focus remained on building the participants' agency by giving them the opportunity to bring up community development matters they felt were important. The data reveals that there are complexities in maintaining a participatory approach in selection of video topics, and negotiations have to be done to ensure that participants continue to gain agency rather than feeling that they have lesser freedom than the organization. Gaining this agency within the organization also helped participants to start taking up leader-like roles in their community, which is discussed next.

Becoming leaders

Mahita had several meetings in the areas where they wanted to implement the PV project and talked about its purpose to gather support. There was continuous engagement with the community during the search for issues, in the form of finding stories from the community, shooting videos, and conducting screenings. This engagement became the beginning of building a relationship with the community. Where the participants had earlier faced harassment from several community members, they now had increasing community support. There was a marked change in the participants' relationship with the community, as the quote below demonstrates:

Now, when we go around they greet us and say, 'Hey, those Videowale (Note 2) have come.' Earlier they would say, 'These girls have no work and they move around with cameras wearing burqas, as if they've become big reporters'. Masiya, Community Organizer, in a personal interview.

The engagement with the community helped the participants to assume leader-like positions, supporting other women, and even men, in understanding gender issues and possibly motivating them to bring about change. In addition, the community saw value in what the participants were doing, and this recognition placed the participants in a more powerful position in the society:

People are changing and their perspective towards us is changing. They know we can make videos and help them solve issues. Shakera, participant, in a personal interview.

As the participants' relationship with their community grew stronger with more video screenings, they had community members coming up to them and asking for specific issues to be covered, such as poor sanitation facilities or lack of government school in the locality, as the statement below reveals:

People would say, come with us, we will tell you about another issue. More and more people kept coming; not to say, 'leave', but to say, 'come with us'... people have understood that we are not doing anything wrong, but that we want to show what is going wrong. Amreen, participant, in a personal interview.

All the respondents in the study noted that they saw the attitudes of several community members change over time. After the screening of their videos, which showed girls and young women pursuing their education or having a job, parents often got inspired and said that they also wanted their daughters to complete their education. They felt that such videos were triggering noticeable change, even though they were unsure of attributing it directly to the videos.

The response of the community members and the forging of stronger relations with them enhanced the participants' understanding of their ability to mobilize communities on local issues. Frediani (2010, p. 176) states: 'Freedom is understood as a concept comprising components of both well-being and agency. Well-being freedom is concerned with objectives that a person values for his/her well-being. Agency is concerned with the individual's freedom to choose and bring about the changes that he/she values'. Agency freedom, therefore, includes acts which are not just about the agents' own well-being, but those of others (Sen, 2000). The participants' engagement with their community meant that their well-being and agency freedom were being furthered, as they worked with the community to trigger change on issues such as infrastructure in the slums and education of girls. They were now able to do things that they valued, not just for their individual self, but also for others in their community.

Beyond the PV projects

While working with their community was crucial for the participants, they also wanted to enhance their skills further to pursue opportunities beyond the PV project. Several of them aspired to join the mainstream media, mostly television journalism. The quote below illustrates that:

We also want to get some professional training. There are new cameras, new editing systems... We want to learn all of that and do professional work. If we know professional filmmaking, then we can take this further. Amreen, participant, in a personal interview.

Earning a stipend had allowed the young women participants to negotiate their position in their families, and interviews with them showed they now wanted to gain more agency within their households by increasing their income. Though most of the participants were committed to working in their communities with PV, they also wanted to improve their career and financial prospects. Eventually, they either expected the organization to increase their stipend, or they planned to look for other opportunities. These efforts by the participants can be viewed as complex capabilities, which include achieving self-respect and taking decisions on issues about their own lives (Sen, 2000). Sen (2000) stresses that capabilities correspond to the freedom people have to live a life they have reason to value. In this case, the young women were making a conscious choice about what their needs and interests were, pursuing something which could have a deep impact in their lives. Kabeer (1999, p. 437) refers to this as a process of empowerment where there is an 'expansion in people's ability to make strategic life choices in a context where this ability was previously denied to them.'

There were continuous attempts by Mahita to help its participants get career placements or restart their education. This paper argues that this consideration of the participants' objectives promoted their agency, and in some cases contributed to social change. For instance, when a participant from Mahita was supported to pursue a career in videography, she became one of the very few young women in her community to take up employment, thereby impacting other women's position in her local community. In support is Sen's (2000) argument that different agency aspects, such as women's earning power, economic role, literacy, and education and so on, positively contribute to women's voice and agency. These can impact not just women's wellbeing, entitlement, and position within the family, but also in the society as a whole.

However, there were certain norms that were seen as extremely difficult to negotiate, even with the support provided by the organization to the participants, like those around marriage. Such norms threatened the young women participants' continuous engagement with social issues, and therefore, their ability to continue as agents of change. The program manager said in his interview that in the local community, working outside home after marriage was not acceptable, and all the current participants would have to leave the project once they got married. Though participants break stereotypes, resist gender norms, trigger changes in their community through the PV process, continuing to be agents of such change seemed a difficult proposition in the backdrop of such strict local gender norms.

Nevertheless, evidence was gathered during the research that even if negotiating on norms around marriage was extremely difficult, the participants wanted to challenge even those. Amreen and Yasmeen shared that they have been able to convince their parents that they should marry at a later age. Yasmeen also hoped that after her marriage she would be able to convince her husband to let her continue working. The data reveals that there is a possibility of circumventing these stricter gender norms, if the participants can gain more access to resources and encouragement from the organization, which might enable them to continue as agents of change.

Conclusions

It has been acknowledged in the literature that most scholars lay emphasis on how PV has been able to empower and enable less powerful groups (Low, Rose, Salvio, & Palacios, 2012). There is also an assumption that participating in a PV process by itself can enable people to become agents of change. However, this study found that the process of enabling participants to become agents is usually challenging in the presence of oppressive power relations. As participants go through the process of joining a project, training, making videos, and screening them, they have to keep negotiating stricter gender norms. Therefore, there is a need for participants to constantly negotiate power, reflect on the power relations, access resources, build skills, and meaningfully engage with the community.

Scholars talk about various factors that impact agency, such as personal attributes, social and environmental factors (Nussbaum, 2003; Sen, 1993), resources (Kabeer, 1999), and domination of certain groups (Ibrahim & Alkire, 2007). This paper posits that each person has some agency situated within them (even if restricted) to resist power over them in an overt or covert manner. When participants are supported, they become more able to resist social norms, pursue their valued goals, and become agents. This support can be in form of resources, including human, social and monetary resources, which can impact agency. Access to resources helps lesser powerful groups to negotiate power with the more powerful ones, which provides them the opportunity to build their agency further. In addition, gaining skills, which can help people access more resources, is crucial for agency.

Therefore, summarily, this research found that agency-development is a continuous process in a long-term PV project, since power relations tend to be pervasive. Nevertheless, reflection can enable participants to use their agency to influence these factors in turn. They can engage with more powerful groups in their community and work towards the well-being of others, negotiate power, gain more powerful positions, and build their agency.

Notes

1. The practice, which requires women from certain communities to conceal their faces. The term is also used to denote sex segregation in physical space.

2. Literal translation from Hindi – video people.

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