“I am like this lamp, lighting the lamp of better health. Workers like me can light another and another and thus encircle the whole world. That is Health for All”

- Arole and Arole, 1994
Abstract

Gender inequality is one of the biggest challenges in rural India. Many girls are still subject to early arranged marriages, receive less educational development and ultimately have poorer health outcomes. In many villages pervaded by traditional beliefs, now outlawed practices such as dowry and female infanticide continue to occur. Unmarried and widowed women are especially disadvantaged in these circumstances, often perceived as being a burden on their family, and turning to means such as prostitution to financially support themselves and their families. In response to this, the Community Based Health Project (CBHP) initiated the Women’s sewing training program in early 2013. The program aims to equip disadvantaged women and widows with vocational sewing skills and thus enable them to achieve some financial independence and a better quality of life. Current and graduated students from the program were interviewed in the present study to evaluate the effectiveness of the program in achieving these aims. More than 40 women participated in the sewing program in its first year. All of the participants reported being very satisfied with the program and would readily refer others to participate. Drawbacks of the program included insufficient teaching room and sewing machines for use by all participants. Additionally, only a few participants owned their own sewing machines and were able to go on and earn an income after graduating from the program.

It is thus suggested that CBHP do more to help participants acquire their own sewing machines after graduation, to assist women in achieving financial independence with their newly acquired skills. The program has been effective in teaching women practical sewing skills, and has inspired many disenfranchised women to seek better vocational opportunities for themselves. To ensure the long-term effectiveness of the program, follow-up of the graduated participants is also essential, either by the (Village Health Worker) VHWs or CBHP volunteers, as ongoing support and encouragement is instrumental in helping graduates make use of their skills.
Introduction

Women’s empowerment is primarily concerned with enhancing women’s confidence and self-efficacy. With regards to empowerment, women need to be able to contribute to community development and participate in economic, social and political activities. Economic empowerment is one of the most fundamental components of women’s empowerment. Although there is no standard definition of women’s economic empowerment, the majority of efforts to evaluate women’s economic empowerment programs focus on quantifiable outcomes such as more resources dedicated to women’s material consumption and personal time, increased access to credit or revenue, increased decision making power, and increased financial autonomy. Activities can only qualify as economic empowerment if they advance women’s financial status in a meaningful and sustainable way. Hence, the advent of programs such as micro-finance or micro-credit, fair trade and poverty eradication self-help groups are beneficial for disadvantaged women in developing countries.

Some of the most powerful drivers for the economic empowerment of women are education and skills training. With the knowledge and skills acquired through such activities, women are able to pursue better work and social opportunities. There are several ways in which disadvantaged women can access training for economic empowerment. Some private financial and training institutions sponsor training programs for them to work in certain identified sectors. Many NGOs and charitable organisations run specific poverty alleviation programs in which female beneficiaries are trained in income-generating skills. There are also government schemes and national development programs that focus on skills training and development of human capital.

In India, many government programs exist to assist disadvantaged populations such as those living below poverty line (BPL). Due to corruption, however, many of these efforts do not ultimately reach those most in need. Most training programs run by different private institutions are offered at a price unaffordable for the women who live BPL (ie a basic 6 month sewing program costs on average 1,500 rupees per person, whereas most BPL individuals earn less than 61.80 rupees per month). These women often lack the financial resources even to travel to the towns and cities where these training courses are available. To address this problem, CBHP designed a sewing training program specifically aimed at BPL women, through targeted promotion, and focus on accessibility and affordability.

In January 2013, the CBHP sewing training program started in a tiny room situated below the CBHP clinic in Buldana. Due to limited funding the class started with only 4 machines between 7-10 students, and 2 hired trainers working simultaneously. The VHW in each project village (Mohegaon, Khadki, Naiknagar, Manubai) helped promote the program to women of identified need, and CBHP assisted in transport to encourage participation in the program.

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Aims & Overview

Project Aims:
1. To challenge gender inequity in rural villages by empowering poor and disadvantaged women
2. To enable women to achieve better quality of life for themselves
3. To instil women with greater self-confidence and income-generating skills

The objective of this paper is to evaluate the impact and effectiveness of the current CBHP sewing training program, by examining participant performance, the factors that influence the participants’ post-training utilisation of acquired skills, and income generation. In line with that, this study aims to verify whether the project aims are being achieved.

The sewing training program runs for a duration of 6 months. There are two group classes per day, and classes run 6 days a week from Monday to Saturday (10-2pm; 2-4pm). Usually there are 10 students per class. Participants who could afford it were asked to pay a fee 300 rupees for the 6 month course (Average commercial price is 1500 rupees for an equivalent 6 month course). Despite the heavily subsidized tuition fee, there were still many village women who could not afford the full amount. In these cases Dr. Moses would provide a further subsidy based on need and likely benefit from the program. Students were asked to bring their own scissors and papers to class, but again there are some students who couldn’t afford this. CBHP provided funds for these students.

Transportation (rickshaw) was provided for all participation without charge by CBHP for the first 3 months, to encourage village women to attend the program. Women identified as widows (a target population of particular need) were provided with free transportation for the entirety of the program, and a sewing machine was also provided to them after their graduation, again at no cost. Tuition fees paid by the students were used to cover part of the electricity bills, teacher salaries, sewing materials, and machine maintenance. To allow for the minimal tuition fee, CBHP subsidized the remainder of the costs each month.

Methods

Participants were asked to complete a questionnaire in their first lesson of the sewing class (see Appendix 1a). The information collected from these questionnaires provided baseline data for the participants. After they graduated from the class, participants were asked to complete another questionnaire (see Appendix 1b), and participate in either an interview or a focus group discussion session (see Appendix 2). The data collection was conducted by CBHP volunteers with the aid of local translators.

14 participants were surveyed in January 2014. At this time, 7 participants were currently attending the classes, and 7 were recently graduated.

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Results

Table 1 to Table 7 illustrate the participant demographics, marital status of the participant, number of participants with and without personal income, number of participants who own a sewing machine, participants’ evaluation of the program, recommendation to others, and the outcome of the program.

Table 1: Participant demographics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Family size</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lowest</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Highest</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mode</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>18.07</td>
<td>5.47</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: Marital status of the participant

<p>| | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Single</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3: Number of participants with and without personal income

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Without income</th>
<th>With income</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Before coming to class</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>After coming to class</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4: Number of participants who own a sewing machine

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Without machines</th>
<th>With machines</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Before coming to class</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>After coming to class</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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Table 5: Program evaluation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Evaluation</th>
<th>Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Very helpful</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helpful</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Satisfactory</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not very helpful</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not helpful at all</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 6: Recommendation to others

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Recommendation</th>
<th>Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 7: Outcome of the program

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Outcome Description</th>
<th>Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>only sew clothes in class</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sewing for family (only)</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sewing for income (only)</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sewing for both family and income</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>others: stitch by hands for family</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total (graduated participants)</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 8 shows the graduated students’ self-evaluation of performance across a range of sewing skills, including: a) drafting; b) cutting; c) knowledge of materials required for stitching; d) knowledge about machine parts; and e) measurements (See Appendix 1b: Section C). Participants’ skills were scored by: No improvement: 0, Minimal improvement: 1, Moderate improvement: 2, Improved a lot: 3.

Scores were totalled up, and overall performances were scored by: No improvement 0-5, Minimal improvement: 5-9, Moderate improvement 9-14, Improve a lot: 15.
Table 8: Participants overall performance (graduated participants)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Performance Level</th>
<th>Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No improvement</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minimal improvement</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moderate improvement</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improved a lot</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Following are the key points collected from the focus group discussion with the all participants:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Questions</th>
<th>Answers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| How long does it take for you to travel to the sewing class?             | Approximately 30 minutes by bus for students who stay nearer to Buldana  
Approximately an hour by bus for student who stay further away from Buldana  
Approximately 15 minutes by cycle for students who stay in Buldana        |
| What motivated you to come to our sewing class?                          | Earning extra income for the family  
It's my hobby  
Helpful for the future                                                                                                           |
| How did you find out about the sewing class?                            | There is a notice board in front of the classroom.  
CBHP volunteers recommended to my friend.  
The sewing class teacher tells a friend of hers to come for this.  
Village health worker.  
Another friend of the sewing class introduced (recommended?)               |
| What else do you do besides coming to our sewing class?                  | Studying in the college.  
Completing housework at home.                                                                                                       |
| Does your family support you to come to our sewing class?                | Most of them yes. However there was one student whose father forced her to stop attending the class.  
Some students were only given permission to attend the class during their vacations/holiday from college.  
Village health worker had to try to convince those parents who at first did not allow their children to come for the sewing class due to safety reasons, income issue, and/ or who believed that women should stay at home. |
<p>| What are some of                                                           | Not getting a sewing machine to practice, which leads to gradual loss of                                                                                                                                    |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Answer</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>the challenges you faced after you graduated from the sewing class?</td>
<td>sewing skills due to lack of practice.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How do you address the problems you mentioned?</td>
<td>Try to share/ practice sewing in houses that have a sewing machine. This only allows for sewing for the family, however, not for income generation. Hand-stitching at home, and sometimes using a friend’s machine. Will try to get a sewing machine after one/ two months.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What’s your future aspiration?</td>
<td>After 3 months or more practice, I wish to teach other people and generate some of my own business. Hopping to become financially independent. Open my own class. Depends on what my husband says. I will then decide if I will continue working.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you think the class could be taught in a better way? And how?</td>
<td>Bigger room. I do appreciate the existing small room, however, I love it. More machines (we only have 4 at the moment), requesting for 2 more. Designer booklet (for fashion design). Cotton materials for stitching. Different machines for pattern making. Advanced class to provide further training (to learn complex sewing techniques)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Discussion

All of the participants reported the program to be highly helpful. They were very active in class, displaying eagerness to learn and initiative. Although the classroom was small for the group size, and participants were required to share sewing machines most of the time, they still reported really enjoying the class and appreciated having the opportunity to enhance their sewing skills.

The program achieved its aim of improving participants’ sewing skills and, for many, also in improving their livelihoods. It has given many women from these remote villages the opportunity to step out from their home and travel to the city. Initially, some participants were prohibited from travelling into town due to traditional family beliefs that women should stay at home. Through the program, VHWs in project villages were able to promote the idea of gender equality and female vocational training, altering some of these traditional beliefs and enabling more village women the opportunity to work and travel.

Some participants also reported that when they started contributing financially to the family, their husbands began to show them more respect. This is a dramatic shift from the woman being perceived as a burden on the family to being a potential breadwinner. Her social standing is elevated as she becomes a provider for their family and, through ownership of her own finances, is able to steward funds in the care of her family. It is hoped that through these small shifts in perception, the idea of gender equality can slowly permeates through a village community.

The dowry system presents another challenge for women and gender equality, especially in rural villages communities in India. Although it was outlawed by the Indian government in 1961, many families in rural communities continue to practice it privately. Lack of awareness, policy enforcement, and education are some of the main reasons villagers continue in these backward practices. Through the women’s sewing training program, participants were able to gain not only sewing skills but also awareness of gender discrimination and their rights in the current system. Girls were able to explore concepts of love marriage and career development through communicating with class peers, teachers, and CBHP members, challenging traditional practices like early and arranged marriages. Despite this, many younger participants remained bound to forced marriages prearranged by family, or preferred an arranged marriage for themselves. Nevertheless, the training program has helped to introduce these ideas and an increased awareness of women rights to its participants, encouraging cultural change in this area. Interestingly, some participants reported that the acquisition of sewing skills allowed them to pay a lesser dowry for their marriage, as they were perceived as being able to make a contribution to the family.

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There are, however, significant limitations in the program. Over half of the participants lack ongoing access to a sewing machine after graduating from the program. Due to limited resources, CBHP was only able to provide free sewing machines to widows and women identified to be of particular need, in this case only both of the widow were sponsored, and only one participant was able to buy the machine without getting any funds. One potential solution was for graduated students is to share a sewing machine part-time, however this limits the amount of sewing work individuals can do and is not conducive for income generation. Some students attempted hand stitching at home, but this is even less efficient and many students did not get enough practice for this type of sewing in the class itself. Consequently, some participants discontinue their sewing, and these skills go to waste or are subsequently lost through lack of use.

Another proposed solution was to purchase a few sewing machines to for shared use in each village. This was later deemed unsuitable due to the lack of suitable facilities within villages with both electricity and a water supply, as well as challenges in ensuring security and maintenance of the machines. A similar proposition was to run ongoing sewing class within individual villages. This idea, however, faced the same challenges as above of requiring appropriate secure facilities in which to run.

An alternative solution is for graduating students to apply for subsidised sewing machines through an existing government scheme. Under this scheme individuals identified as Below Poverty Line (BPL) and having received recognised training, can apply to purchase a sewing machine at a subsidized cost of 2,000 rupees (as opposed to the market price of 5,000-10,000 rupees). CBHP can assist BPL graduates in acquiring this government subsidy, by assisting with applications and lobbying the local government. This support is necessary as the application process is known to be long and arduous, applicants often discouraged by lack of outcome and expectation of bribes.

As only participants with reliable access to a sewing machine are able to effectively generate income through these skills, there is great need for CBHP to encourage better access to machine ownership. This is necessary if the sewing training program is to have a lasting impact and achieve its objective of enhancing the lives of its participants, particularly those who are from BPL families. This can be aided by increased fundraising, support of private donors and encouraging corporate sponsorship of these social programs. Potential fundraising methods include crowd-sourcing, sponsorship of individual participants and individual fundraising by participants themselves.

When this research was conducted with graduated students, many of them were confident of acquiring a sewing machine within 2-3 months time. There was no clear indication given by these students, however, as to how they would make the acquisition in this short period of time. It is
possible that the presence of CBHP members may influence the students’ responses, making them feel obligated to indicate that they will make ongoing use of their sewing skills. It would be of benefit to conduct another follow-up with the graduates in the following 6-12 months to evaluate the actual outcomes of the program.

In terms of program enhancement, many graduated students requested an advanced sewing class to teach them to stitch more intricate and advanced designs, thus increasing their repertoire and income generating capacity. For instance, a graduate can earn 50 rupees sewing a simple blouse, but can earn 80 rupees sewing a Punjabi suit which requires more advanced skills. Students also said they could benefit from more stitching materials and more advanced machines for pattern making in the class.

In March 2014, the CBHP sewing program will be moved from its current location to the new CBHP Dayanand centre, where participants will have more space to learn in. With larger rooms, it is hoped that more machines can be purchased and made available for students to practice. An additional sewing trainer to allow increased class capacity would also be welcomed, to help meet the demand for affordable vocational training in these communities. The new centre will also be able to provide low-cost accommodation for participants from distant villages, which may help encourage women who were previously limited by distance and transportation issues to attend.

**Study limitations and Conclusion**

Participants were helpful and eager to share during the interview sessions; but there is the possibility that their responses were influenced by the presence of the sewing trainers at the interview. In future, evaluation interviews could be better conducted with the students and translators alone, so that students can be encouraged to express honest and impartial opinions. A separate evaluation can then be conducted with the sewing program trainers.

Overall, the sewing program was well received by participants and perceived to be of great benefit to the attending adolescent girls and women. The main suggestions for improving the program include enhancing access to sewing machine ownership for all graduated students, and the provision of ongoing support to help participants make use of their skills. Further steps can be taken to encourage graduated students to challenge detrimental social norms underpinning gender inequity in their villages. In doing so, CBHP can encourage female empowerment and help women instigate change to attain better health and vocational outcomes, and quality of life in remote and rural India.

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Appendix 1a

Sewing Training Program Questionnaire

Thank you for participating in our sewing training program, we would like to collect some data looking into the effectiveness of the program. Following are a few questions regarding the program, please answer them as accurately as possible.

Section A: Participants information

1. Name:

2. Age: ___ years old

3. Marital status: Single/ Married

4. Number of household members:

5. Number of dependent children:

6. What's your highest qualification of education:

7. How long does it take for you to come to our sewing class?

8. What makes you come to our sewing class?
   income/ earn extra income/ hobby/ others:

9. How did you hear about the sewing class?
   Friends/ VHW/ sewing class teacher/ CBHP volunteers/ advertisement/ others:

10. What else do you do aside from coming to our sewing class?
    Studying/ Housework/ Part-time work/ Full-time work/ others:

11. Are you from a Below Poverty Line (BPL) family: Yes/ No

12. Did you receive any form of training before attending our program: Yes/ No
    If yes, what training is that, and for how long:

13. Do you own a sewing machine: Yes/ No

14. What is your personal/ family income before participating in our program?
    _____________________ Rupees per week
Appendix 1b

Sewing Training Program Questionnaire

Thank you for participating in our sewing training program, we would like to collect some data looking into the effectiveness of the program. Following are a few questions regarding the program, please answer them as accurately as possible.

Section A: Participants information

1. Name:
2. Age: ___ years old
3. Marital status: Single/ Married
4. Number of household members:
5. Number of dependent children:
6. How long does it take you to come to our sewing class? ________ Hours
7. What else do you do aside from coming to our sewing class?
   Studying/ Housework/ Part-time work/ Full-time work/ other:
8. Are you from a Below Poverty Line (BPL) family: Yes/ No
9. Do you own a sewing machine: Yes/ No
10. What is your personal income after participating in our program?

___________________ Rupees per week

Section B: Evaluation of program

In general, do you find our program helpful? Circle one of the following.

a) Very helpful
b) Helpful
c) Satisfactory
d) Not very helpful
e) Not helpful at all

After attending the sewing program, do you:

a) Only sew clothes in class
b) Sew clothes for family
c) Sew clothes for income
d) Sew clothes for both family and income
e) Others

Would you recommend this program to your friends?

a) Yes
b) No
c) Not sure
Section C: Self-evaluation of skills improvement

Evaluate yourself in each of the following:

After attending the class, do you find yourself to have better drafting skills?
   a) Not applicable
   b) No improvement at all
   c) Minimal improvement
   d) Moderate improvement
   e) Improved a lot

After attending the class, do you find yourself to have better cutting skills?
   a) Not applicable
   b) No improvement at all
   c) Minimal improvement
   d) Moderate improvement
   e) Improved a lot

After attending the class, do you find yourself to have better knowledge about materials required for stitching?
   a) Not applicable
   b) No improvement at all
   c) Minimal improvement
   d) Moderate improvement
   e) Improved a lot

After attending the class, do you find yourself to have better knowledge about machine parts?
   a) Not applicable
   b) No improvement at all
   c) Minimal improvement
   d) Moderate improvement
   e) Improved a lot

After attending the class, do you find yourself to have better skills in taking measurements?
   a) Not applicable
   b) No improvement at all
   c) Minimal improvement
   d) Moderate improvement
   e) Improved a lot

Thank you for your time and we hope you enjoy the program. Please comment below if you do have any general comments regarding on our program:
___________________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________________
Appendix 2

Sewing Training Program Interview/ Focus Group Questions

INTRODUCTION:

Welcome, and thank you all for contributing your time and effort to be here today. As you may know, the Community Based Health Project is underway, and we are constantly seeking more feedback in order to improve our services and projects. Today, we wish to learn from you, **what are the advantages and disadvantages of the programs and how the program has made a difference to you**. These are the goals of our discussion today. We invited you here because we know that each of you has valuable knowledge and experiences to share. We ask that you will be open and honest with us, for no one will be identified or reprimanded for what they say here. The better we can understand what the real issues are, the better we can help families within the community improve their livelihoods. In order to ensure that everyone’s thoughts are heard, we ask that only one person speak at a time. We ask that you speak for yourself, not for what you think others believe, and that you respect the opinions of others, for different opinions will be heard today and we may not agree on everything.

In addition, we wish to record this discussion so that we have an accurate record of the information collected today.

Does anyone have any questions? Does everyone understand and agree with the goals of this discussion? Is everybody ok to proceed?

1. Does your family support you in coming to our sewing class?

2. What is your future aspiration? How are you going to achieve this?

3. Do you think the class could be taught in a better way? How?

4. What are some of the features that you like about the class? Why?

5. What are some of the features that you don’t like about the class? Why?

6. What are some of the challenges you faced after graduating from the sewing class?

7. How did you overcome the problems you mentioned?