Adaptation in women’s empowerment  
*Strategies for gender mainstreaming have to go beyond education and skill development*

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Women’s empowerment is a mainstay of WOTR’s work. A cross-cutting priority, gender concerns are embedded in each and every activity. Traditionally, this has been addressed by building women’s social capital and facilitating their empowerment by organising them into solidarity groups (SHGs). Interventions also extend to building women’s capacity to address their and their children’s concerns through health services and providing personal care advisories, literacy, numeracy and personality development training. It has also actively engaged men in creating avenues for effective representation in the decision-making bodies of the village.

These interventions have had much success in gender mainstreaming and have helped women acquire livelihood and life skills to influence the economic and sustainable development pathways of their families and communities. However, as WOTR completes 25 years of work in Maharashtra and other semi-arid parts of India, we would like to step back and critically reflect on whether the same strategies will hold good for the future. In the context of changing circumstances, market influences, resource constraints, erratic climatic conditions and rising aspirations, etc., does women’s empowerment stop at education, capacity building and skill development?

While traditional women's empowerment activities have focused on women's rights and responsibilities, they have not been able to level the playing field in terms of economic parity between the sexes. As a society we appreciate that that has economic value and which, despite any idealistic stand one might have, does equate to power in today’s world. Education, sensitisation, capacity building are all no doubt very important, but we can’t ignore the crude, but simplistic equation in society, money = power = empowerment.

With this in mind, WOTR has been rethinking its traditional women’s empowerment activities. While activities like organizing women into SHGs will continue, the new focus will be on providing financial and business development support to start and successfully manage micro-enterprises and create avenues of access to micro-insurance. Our objective is to ensure that every woman has a ‘choice’ of what to engage in based on preference and capability, and not just dictated by gender stereotypes or skewed economic dimensions of society.

In this issue, we bring to you five stories of women’s empowerment - from taking initiative to solve social issues in the village, to revolutionising rice cultivation and collective efforts of men and women to shift to organic farming. We also have a final guest article that highlights the need for a market oriented approach in women’s empowerment projects. We hope these will be thought provoking and prompt you to revert with feedback - on how we continue to evolve while embarking on the next phase of WOTR’s engagement in sustainable development.