

Community Based Elder Care Through Self Help Groups the Vosard Model of Elder Empowerment

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Abstract

India's demographic landscape is experiencing a significant transformation, with a rapidly growing elderly population projected to reach 319 million by 2050. This demographic shift presents various challenges, particularly in rural areas, including social isolation, declining physical and mental health, and limited access to essential services. In response, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have played a vital role in addressing the needs of older adults through community-based interventions. This paper explores the impact of Elder Self-Help Groups (ESHGs) initiated by VOSARD (Voluntary Organisation for Social Action and Rural Development), an NGO operating in the Idukki district of Kerala. Using a case study approach, the research examines how ESHGs empower senior citizens by promoting mutual support, psychosocial well-being, financial independence, and community participation. The findings indicate that the formation of 136 ESHGs with over 1,800 elderly members resulted in substantial improvements in leadership, financial literacy, health awareness, legal empowerment, and economic resilience. VOSARD's integrated initiatives—ranging from caregiver training and health services to livelihood promotion and legal education—present a holistic model of successful aging. The paper concludes that VOSARD's interventions serve as a replicable model of community-based elder care, demonstrating how participatory approaches and grassroots engagement can effectively promote dignity, independence, and quality of life among older adults in rural India.

Keywords: Older Adults, Elder Self-Help Groups, Healthy Aging, Community-Based Intervention, Rural Development, NGO, VOSARD, Kerala.

INTRODUCTION

India is undergoing a demographic shift, with a growing population of older adults projected to reach 319 million by 2050 (United Nations, 2023). This increase in the aging population presents challenges such as loneliness, reduced functional ability, and financial insecurity, particularly in rural areas. In this context, civil society organizations have played a crucial role in fostering community support systems for the elderly. Among these efforts, VOSARD (Voluntary Organisation for Social Action and Rural Development), a non-governmental organization in Kerala, has been remarkable for its commitment to rural lives and marginalized people. The 'Senior Citizen Program' project primarily focuses on senior

citizens' welfare through various participatory development initiatives. A key initiative by VOSARD has been the formation and nurturing of Elder Self-Help Groups (ESHGs), designed to enhance the psychosocial and economic well-being of older adults. These groups aim to empower senior citizens by promoting mutual support, financial security, social interaction, and active community participation. The present article explores the functioning and impact of Elder Self-Help Groups implemented by VOSARD, shedding light on how community-based interventions can foster successful aging.

ELDERLY PEOPLE AND HEALTHY AGING

Healthy aging is a multidimensional concept that encompasses maintaining physical health, mental well-being, social engagement, and functional independence as individuals grow older. The World Health Organization (WHO, 2015) defines healthy aging as “the process of developing and maintaining the functional ability that enables well-being in older age.” This perspective transcends the mere absence of disease and emphasizes the importance of empowering older adults to engage in activities they value. In India, where the elderly population is rapidly increasing, ensuring healthy aging presents unique challenges due to socioeconomic disparities, limited access to healthcare, and the decline of traditional family support systems (Rajan & Aliyar, 2016). Older adults often encounter a variety of age-related health issues such as chronic diseases (diabetes, hypertension, arthritis), cognitive decline, and mobility limitations, which can significantly affect their quality of life (Patel et al., 2021). Moreover, psychosocial challenges like isolation, loneliness, and a lack of purposeful engagement can heighten the risk of depression and cognitive deterioration. Therefore, interventions aimed at promoting healthy aging must adopt a holistic approach, focusing on physical health and mental resilience, social participation, financial independence, and access to care services. Community-based models such as Elder Self-Help Groups (ESHGs) align with this holistic approach by fostering mutual support, empowerment, and active engagement among the elderly, thereby positively contributing to the trajectory of healthy aging (Help Age India, 2014).

ELDER SELF HELP GROUPS

Elder Self-Help Groups (ESHGs) are voluntary associations of older adults who come together to support each other socially, emotionally, and financially. These groups operate on collective action and mutual support principles, empowering elderly individuals to identify their needs, set goals, and take initiatives for their well-being. Rooted in the self-help group movement, ESHGs adapt the model to address age-related vulnerabilities through regular meetings, savings and credit activities, health awareness programs, and intergenerational bonding activities (Help Age India, 2014). Typically comprising 10–20 members, ESHGs promote autonomy and leadership among elderly people, especially women, enabling them to voice their concerns and engage actively in decision-making. Through these platforms, members gain access to basic services and develop a sense of purpose and belonging, which are critical factors in enhancing psychological well-being and reducing social isolation (Narayan & Mohanty, 2019). In rural contexts where state support systems may be limited, these groups fill a crucial gap by fostering resilience and promoting dignity in old age. VOSARD's implementation of the ESHG model has demonstrated how grassroots-level engagement can transform the lives of older adults. Through training, capacity-building, and consistent facilitation, VOSARD has strengthened these groups to become change agents within their communities.

METHODOLOGY

The primary aim of this study is to examine the role of non-governmental organizations in facilitating positive change in the lives of elderly individuals, specifically regarding the interventions of VOSARD. This study seeks to explore and analyse the various programs implemented by the organization and their broader social impact, particularly in enhancing the psychosocial well-being, livelihood security, and community participation of older adults. By adopting a case study approach, the research aims to provide an in-depth understanding of VOSARD's strategies, implementation practices, and outcomes in rural development and elderly care.

Institution Profile:

The Voluntary Organization for Social Action and Rural Development (VOSARD), registered under the Travancore-Kochi Cultural, Scientific, Charitable, and Religious Trust Act XII of 1955 with registration number I-750/98, is a non-governmental organization founded in 1998. Its primary mission is to improve the lives of marginalized, disadvantaged, and underprivileged populations residing in the remote and underdeveloped hill regions of the Idukki district and other areas of Kerala. VOSARD envisions a value-based society where vulnerable groups, such as the poor, children, women, individuals with disabilities, and other marginalized communities, are empowered to lead meaningful and independent lives. The organization's core objectives include empowering socially and economically disadvantaged sections, promoting and facilitating Self-Help Groups (SHGs), implementing microcredit systems for financially needy individuals, and strengthening connections between communities and government services. Furthermore, VOSARD conducts youth development initiatives, implements specialized programs for individuals with disabilities and older adults, and undertakes efforts to care and protect children.

CARE AND PROTECTION FOR SENIOR CITIZENS

Although aging is a natural phase of human life, it often presents numerous challenges for older adults, including financial insecurity, health-related issues, inadequate housing, neglect, isolation, and a lack of accessible care and support services. In a survey of 4,793 senior citizens aged 55 and older, 500 individuals were selected as the primary beneficiaries of a project based on their socio-economic status, physical condition, and family circumstances. This initiative, funded by Misereor, is being carried out in the Chakkupallam and Erattayar Panchayats of Idukki District. The project seeks to enhance the overall quality of life for elderly individuals by fostering self-help practices and promoting community-based care and support systems by actively involving families and local stakeholders. Additionally, the program aims to protect the rights of older adults and improve their livelihoods, particularly for active and semi-dependent individuals, by facilitating access to health and welfare services and encouraging meaningful participation in family and community life.

Main Objectives of the Project

The project aims to empower elderly individuals by organizing them into self-help groups and federations, fostering collective strength and mutual support. It seeks to ensure their right to health and rehabilitation by facilitating access to affordable and nearby services. Additionally, the project strives to create sustainable livelihood opportunities to enhance their earning capacity and promote independent living. By collaborating with policymakers and government departments, it endeavours to safeguard the rights of the elderly. The project promotes inclusive families and elder-friendly communities through community awareness initiatives and family counselling. Furthermore, it emphasizes building the capacity of project staff and federation leaders to fulfill their roles and responsibilities effectively.

OTHER MAJOR ACTIVITY AREAS

1. Community-Based Empowerment and Rehabilitation

Since its inception, VOSARD has actively engaged in various humanitarian efforts across the most remote and underserved regions of Idukki district and other parts of Kerala. The organization's foundational work empowers communities through mobilization, capacity building, and rehabilitation. One of its core strategies has been organizing economically marginalized individuals, particularly women and persons with disabilities (PWDs), into Self-Help Groups (SHGs) and federating them into higher-level people's organizations. These community structures empower members to secure their rights, access development opportunities, and build resilience through awareness generation, leadership development, livelihood enhancement, microfinance, and advocacy. In disability rehabilitation, VOSARD has taken significant steps since 2002 by forming Disabled People's Organizations (DPOs) at multiple levels, reaching nearly 5,800 individuals. Its community-based rehabilitation (CBR) approach integrates sustainable livelihood initiatives, home-based care, partnerships with local governance, and mental health support, all aligned with WHO guidelines. Women's empowerment has also been a key focus, with over 5,650 rural women organized into 315 SHGs. These women have received support through leadership training, income-generating activities, and access to legal and financial services, enabling them to overcome poverty and social exclusion. To support families holistically, VOSARD has operated a Family Counselling Centre since 2004, addressing a broad range of challenges, including domestic conflict, adolescent behavioural issues, substance abuse, and mental health crises. This centre, backed by the Central and State Social Welfare Boards, serves as a critical platform for conflict resolution and value-based family strengthening.

2. Children and Youth Welfare Activities

VOSARD's commitment to child and youth development is reflected in various targeted interventions. Since 2011, the organization has served as the implementing agency for the national Childline 1098 project in Idukki. NGOs no longer operate this project; each state government runs it directly. Consequently, VOSARD is not involved in this initiative. This 24-hour helpline, supported by the Government of India under the Integrated Child Protection Scheme, provides essential support to distressed children. Services include shelter, medical aid, emotional support, rescue and repatriation, sponsorship, and broader protective interventions. Operating from centres in Kattappana and Kumily, Childline has become a crucial safety net for vulnerable children in the district.

In addition to child protection, VOSARD has emphasized youth development, primarily through vocational training programs for unemployed rural youth. In partnership with the Functional Vocational Training and Research Society (FVTRS), Bangalore, the organization offers skill development in tailoring, handicrafts, driving, livestock management, welding, and other trades. These efforts have successfully trained 150 economically disadvantaged youth, helping them build livelihoods and attain financial independence. Another noteworthy initiative is the Kaval Project, launched in 2016, which provides psychosocial care and support to children in conflict with the law. Implemented across Peerumedu, Udumbanchola, and Idukki Taluks, the project includes individualized care planning and a structured 17-day training programme delivered by professionals, all under the technical guidance of NIMHANS and the Kerala Department of Women and Child Development.

3. Environmental Sustainability and Rural Livelihoods

VOSARD emphasizes sustainable development through environmentally sound agricultural practices and the promotion of clean energy. In the hilly regions of Idukki, the organization supports small-scale farmers by encouraging mixed farming systems to ensure food and nutritional security. The initiative involves

forming farmers' clubs and clusters, introducing simple and accessible technologies, and promoting natural resource management practices such as watershed development, rainwater harvesting, soil conservation, and organic farming. These models have proven to be replicable, spreading to neighbouring districts as successful community-led efforts. Another vital initiative has been promoting non-conventional energy sources like biogas and solar power. Through awareness campaigns and training, rural families are encouraged to adopt renewable energy solutions. The use of Ferro cement technology in constructing biogas units has gained popularity due to its affordability and durability.

4. Water and Sanitation Support Services

Addressing one of the most fundamental needs of rural communities, VOSARD acts as a support organization for the JALANIDHI project, initiated by the Kerala Rural Water Supply and Sanitation Agency (KRWSA). This demand-driven program aims to ensure the long-term availability of clean and safe drinking water in rural areas. VOSARD facilitates the formation of Beneficiary Groups (BGs), helping them implement the project in a participatory manner while providing technical and social support throughout.

IMPACT OF ESHG ON OLDER ADULTS

Implementing the Elder Self-Help Group (ESHG) project by VOSARD has led to significant and multi-dimensional improvements in the lives of older adults. A total of 136 ESHGs were formed, comprising 1,876 elderly members, and 12 Panchayat-level federations were established to coordinate activities and represent the collective interests of senior citizens. These groups have become platforms for social bonding, mutual support, and effective advocacy. Each group has developed a thrift and credit system to facilitate internal lending and enhance members' access to financial resources. As part of the financial empowerment efforts, 70 ESHGs and 3 federations have opened operational bank accounts, fostering financial inclusion and independence among the elderly.

Leadership training sessions were conducted for all group and federation leaders. As a result, the leaders are now effectively coordinating their group activities and addressing the issues faced by their peers. They also facilitate access to government schemes and entitlements, including pensions and benefits for senior citizens. Through 18 advocacy and interface meetings, the leaders have grown confident in voicing the needs and rights of older adults to various government departments and stakeholders. These engagements have led to tangible outcomes, such as enrolment in rural employment guarantee schemes and access to senior citizen concessions. The ESHGs have evolved to function independently, with members demonstrating proficiency in financial record-keeping and regularly holding meetings. Health awareness has also emerged as a key component of the project. A total of 23 health education programs were conducted with the involvement of healthcare professionals, aimed at promoting good health practices among older adults. Additionally, seven medical camps, covering general health, cancer, ENT, eye care, and traditional systems like Ayurveda and Siddha, were organized to address specific health concerns of the elderly.

Caregiver training was another essential aspect of the intervention. These sessions provided practical knowledge on geriatric care and support, particularly relevant for those providing care in economically limited and rural settings. The emotional and physical burden of caregiving was acknowledged, and the training helped caregivers better manage the stress and complexity associated with their roles. As part of ongoing health services, 540 elderly individuals benefited from periodic health check-ups conducted by three community health workers and twelve trained volunteers. These interventions significantly reduced

health risks and improved the overall quality of life for both mobile and bedridden seniors. The project also provided livelihood grants, distributing nearly INR 42,80,000 among 214 beneficiaries. Each individual received INR 20,000 to start a small income-generating activity, promoting economic resilience and self-sufficiency. Fourteen skill development programs were organized during the project period, enabling many elderly participants to engage in productive work. As a result, 572 members now maintain small or large home gardens, with some even supplying saplings and seeds to others. About 55% of the group members are involved in income-generating trades or small businesses. Legal awareness among senior citizens and their caregivers also improved markedly. Around 70% of the elderly population and their family members became informed about their rights under the Maintenance and Welfare of Parents and Senior Citizens Act. This knowledge has empowered them to seek legal protection and claim entitlements, further reinforcing the project's objective of ensuring dignity, support, and active participation for older adults in their families and communities.

CONCLUSIONS

The multifaceted interventions undertaken by VOSARD demonstrate a deep commitment to inclusive, sustainable, and community-centered development in some of the most underserved regions of Kerala. From empowering marginalized groups through self-help structures and rehabilitation efforts to protecting the rights and well-being of children, youth, and the elderly, VOSARD's initiatives encompass critical social, economic, and environmental areas. The organization addresses immediate community needs by fostering participatory development, promoting grassroots leadership, and introducing sustainable livelihood and energy solutions while building long-term resilience and self-sufficiency. As these intervention models continue to evolve and replicate, VOSARD stands as a testament to the transformative power of local engagement and integrated development in rural India.

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