



## Factors Affecting Rural Facilitators' Role: Iran

Farideh Azimi<sup>1</sup> and Mohammad Bagher Kamali<sup>2\*</sup>

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### Abstract

This study aimed to examine key factors affecting rural female facilitators' role in participatory rural development in Tehran Province. Since the researchers intended to have a better insight into the facilitators' role and employ inquiry as a learning forum for bringing about changes for all participants, they preferred to use a case study based upon an appreciative inquiry method. The study divided the factors affecting the facilitators' role into two main categories: driving factors and preventing factors. The former are: two-way communication, election of rural eligible facilitators, participation, sense of responsibility, and the latter are: cultural and tribal fanaticism, lack of permanent female extension workers and frequent management changes. Appreciative inquiry as a positive mode of action research could facilitate the process of education and communication for all stakeholders. We suggested that there should be a shift from the extension as a knowledge transfer to facilitation as people's own knowledge creation. This study showed that appreciative inquiry could facilitate the process of change and gender-awareness. This research method could also facilitate mutual communication between the rural facilitators and extension workers.

**Keywords:**  
*Rural female facilitators,  
Facilitation, Rural develop-  
ment, Appreciative inquiry,  
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<sup>1</sup> Faculty member Agri and RD Planning, Economics Research Institute.  
<sup>2</sup> Department of Extension, Tehran Province, MJA  
\* Corresponding email: [Bagherk@yahoo.com](mailto:Bagherk@yahoo.com)

## INTRODUCTION

Women should participate on a par with men in social, economic and political activities in rural development and should play a crucial role in satisfying their own concrete needs. Development can not be achieved without women's authentic participation. They should have more control on their own destiny. Women's participation and learning is not only an empowering process for women but also a capacitating process for the whole family and society. Gender sensitive approaches often focus on women and ignore men. Whereas, in order to materializing such a crucial objective i.e. bringing about authentic transformation, both groups should be equally addressed and involved (ALINE, 2010). This could be the cornerstone for people's life improvement in all aspects.

The rural female facilitators' project is one of the key rural women projects in the Bureau of rural women's office (BRWO) in the Ministry of Jihad for agriculture (MJA). The project has been carried out by action research method by Kamali and his colleagues since 2000. It has begun in a district, as a pilot, in Chaharmahal va Bakhtiyari Province. Having done this pilot, it has gradually expanded into other provinces, including Tehran Province. In this project, rural women themselves elect their own representatives as rural facilitators. The latter is changed and empowered through participatory communication and education. They consequently facilitate rural women's empowerment. The extension agents of MJA are being simultaneously empowered through two way communication and participatory workshops (Kamali et al, forthcoming).

In this paper, the researchers aim to examine the factors affecting the role of rural female facilitators in Tehran province as a case study. Since the researchers are involved in the project themselves and are interested in learning and changing themselves and to empower the relevant colleagues and rural female facilitators, it was decided to carry out the research by appreciative inquiry method.

We believe that appreciative inquiry is a form of participatory action research. It is not to collect information, rather the research is a

process of learning and change for all of the participants including the researchers themselves. It is also believed that facilitating popular participation at grassroots level is not separated from facilitating participation within the MJA and among its development workers. Facilitation of authentic grassroots participation in a relatively non participatory organization demands patience and perseverance. To foster local participation, it is essential to bring about some changes in the MJA as well (Kamali, 2006). Another crucial objective of the inquiry is to examine how appreciative inquiry can facilitate horizontal communication between extension workers and RFFS. In addition, it was also planned to study how employment of the appreciative inquiry could purvey a learning forum for all participants.

### *Rural development in Iran*

The rural population of Iran is 22 million and facing a high rural immigration rate. Rural development does not just mean agricultural development. Neither, it is achieved by money injection. Rather it demands to bring about some structural changes. In such a way that people have a say and stay on their own feet without crutches. To accomplish such an essential aim, it is necessary to focus on participatory and liberating education for rural populace and simultaneously for government extension agents. In fact it is crucial to focus on "to be" rather than "to have" more. As Freire asserts, this kind of education should be based on two-way discussion and communication. Education can be either domesticating or emancipating. In the former, education is nothing except "filling" or "transferring" knowledge as orthodox extension. Where as, in the latter it is dynamic process of learning through two way communication and interaction. It is opposite of "banking education" (Freire, 1972). Education in MJA is mainly one way imparting of knowledge from MJA's functionaries to the rural populace. It indeed demands a dramatic transformation from communiqué into authentic participatory education and communication.

MJA has a major role in rural development activities in Iran. The MJA has often adopted a

paternalistic approach to development in which it takes on the role of 'guardian' of the rural population. As a result, the rural community is dependent on the MJA's development workers. These development workers have mainly carried out their projects 'for' people with little community participation. Even when participation is mentioned, it mainly referred to people's contribution of physical labour and money, rather than their capacity to actively contribute to planning and decision making. The MJA has therefore overlooked the significant potential contributions and indigenous knowledge of the local community (Kamali, 2003).

To achieve people's participation and empowerment, it demands a change in the role of extension agents that is a change from 'extension' into 'facilitation'. The extension officers should facilitate the process of learning and change rather than to transfer the knowledge. Once the oppressed become conscious of their oppression and the barriers to their own development, they may wish to change the status – quo and the animators may ease the way and help them to do what people decided to do on their own. People can not be developed they can only develop themselves (Nyerere, in: Kamali, 1998).

The process of "man's" empowerment should not be limited to men's liberation; women's emancipation must be included as well. Hegemony is a very complex phenomenon. It does not only imply state and economic powers; male hegemonic power has relatively made rural women invisible in rural areas and the former has imposed his reality upon women. In order to transform the present situation into counter – hegemonic coalition, educational relationship must be altered from "liner male communiqué" into horizontal gender sensitive communication (Kamali, 1998). This liberation process should facilitate wo/men's development and it is the cornerstone of the rural female facilitators' project. The focus of this project is facilitation rather than conventional extension as communiqué (Kamali, forthcoming).

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

Human beings seem to be trapped in the myth that research is all about production of knowledge by few experts. In social sciences, we are facing

with thoughtful and creative subjects. They are human beings. They are not 'objects' to be counted and controlled, and from whom knowledge is to be extracted. The prevalent attitude in orthodox inquiry is the isolation of research from education and action. One of the key characteristics, or better called claims, of dominant social sciences seems to be the 'neutrality' of the researcher; but the neutrality of the researcher is only a myth. S/he, in one way or other, takes sides (Macdonald, in: Carmen, 1990). In this inquiry, we have attempted to take side on the rural poor and neglected.

Nonetheless, what is quite clear is the fact that "the methodological premise that knowledge must be produced by detached observation has contributed to the creation and perpetuation of a 'class' of intellectuals (experts, technocrats and ...) distinct from the masses of direct producers, constituting a separation of mental from manual labour, a class which has seen to be politically active in controlling or influencing social power to promote their own privileges... in this sense non- involvement is a myth – the social researcher is involved consciously or unconsciously in his/ her own bid for social power" (Rahman, 1993).

Having said that, a people – centered development demands its own research approach. When the development of human beings is concerned, there is no room for separation of researchers and the researched. Hall argues that 'the belief that ordinary people have both an ability and right to interpret their problems and to be involved in solutions is a fundamental element in any development [activity] ... and the key to long – lasting solutions' (Hall, in Reason & Rowan, 1981).

The more we carried out participatory research with the participants, the more we learned about the complexity of the issues and challenges of the participatory development research. Throughout our field experiences, it has been realized that validity of the research increases by the degree of researcher's involvement in the actual life of the participants and by the collective views of the participants. It was also found out that research on the base group by external researchers with a subject- object relationship implies incapability of the rural masses and it prevents them

from generating their own solutions and initiatives. It perpetuates their dependency on external planning and action (Rahman, op. cit; Kamali, forthcoming).

Reality is not what we, as researchers, see as something 'objective' over there. The reality can be viewed better if the researcher has a subject-subject relationship with the researched.

During the research period, an attempt has been made to integrate research with education and action. If authentic development is perceived as the process of humanization, it is not another deposit to be made in men, nor is it achieved through 'extension' as transferring knowledge and technology.

Liberation is praxis: The action and reflection of wo/men upon their own world to transform it. Freire continues that this implies that one must be the 'subject' of change in one's own life, not being the object of others' thought and action (Freire, 1972).

Figure 1 on the next page illustrates the basic features of this learning loop of Participatory action research.

Indeed, 'the inquiry should itself be educational and empowering for participants; outcomes should include an action on attitudes and structures that inhibits self-worth, social justice or liberation. So here the criteria of successful research relate more to empowerment or social justice than to increase efficiency or generalizable knowledge' (Maguire, 1987).

One of the evolutionary outcomes of this human inquiry has been a profound change in the researchers' own perception of research and development. For many years we used to work 'for' people. We have gradually learned to work 'with' people. Now, we are learning to let people to work and learn for themselves 'without' us as 'outsiders' (Kamali et al., forthcoming).

Particular lenses have been adopted to examine this case study. For some time I thought I was implementing an authentic action research. In retrospect, I realized that I was gender-blind. I found out that participatory action research would not guarantee the participation of all, neither would it be gender-sensitive per se. I have realized that the power of the patriarchy still

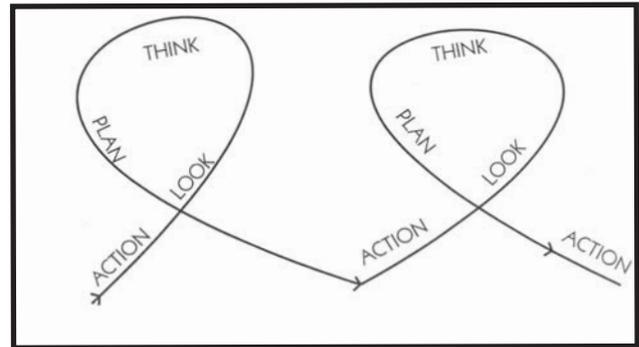


Figure 1: Learning loop of participatory action research. [Hope et al., 1984]

persists even within this alternative participatory research paradigm. Since I have become gender aware I have tried to perceive women's issues, but it is not easy for us 'men' to understand their oppression and exclusion.

If a more just and equitable society between sexes is to be achieved, it is necessary for men to be involved in the process of learning and change (Mosse, in: Kamali, forthcoming). Moreover, our stance is appreciative. We gradually realized that a negative mentality or problem-based paradigm of inquiry, be it participatory rural appraisal or PAR, are self-limiting and obstacles in the process of facilitating authentic development. Since then an attempt has been made to see and inquire the reality from a positive perspective, rather than to look for problems and deficits. 'Appreciative inquiry distinguishes itself from critical modes of research by its deliberately affirmative assumptions about people, organizations and relationship. It focuses on asking the unconditional positive question to ignite transformative dialogue and action within human systems' (Ludema et al., 2006). In this positive approach one perceives the portion that is full and clear rather than focusing on empty and deficient part. It is based on strengths rather than weaknesses, on a vision and on what is possible rather than an analysis of what is not. Our original motivation was to offer an opportunity to the participants to think about the positive images of the future in order to mutually gain more insights through sharing views and experiences about the project and finally improving their practices (Ospina et al., 2004). As it can be easily perceived, action research is an evolving

methodology. It has evolved from gender-biased to gender-sensitive and from problem-biased to positive and appreciative mode of inquiry.

In this inquiry we did our best to treat the participants as co-researchers and less as subjects to extract knowledge from. Moreover it has been attempted to use research as a process of education and change for all participants including the researchers themselves. On the whole, the research has been a process of self-development and capacity-building for all of the participants.

Participants of this human inquiry are:

They are 26 rural female facilitators from Varamin County, 15 rural female facilitators from Damavand County and five relevant extension agents from county to headquarters' level.

To begin the research, at first a meeting was formed with presence of 26 Varamin's rural facilitators. In this meeting different participatory techniques such as: time lines, force-field analysis, semi-structured interview, pair-wised ranking, vision drawing and action plan were applied.

Similar meeting with presence of 15 facilitators formed in Damavand. Having had these two meetings with rural facilitators a focus group discussion was formed with the presence of relevant extension agents from local up to national level. Now an attempt is made to raise some of the key issues discussed in Damavand & Varamin meetings.

#### ***Damavand and Varamin meetings' main outcomes***

Rural facilitators' project in Damavand has begun in 2002, while the RFF project in Varamin started in 2005 and both are still continuing. At first, they were asked what they are proud of as a facilitator. They pointed out that: they have privilege to get acquaintance with others, to increase their and rural women's skills and knowledge, to enhance their relationships with other villagers and to facilitate women's progress and empowerment.

Then, in response to 'what are the project's impacts' they declared the followings:

Women's participation has increased, communication with rural people and different organi-

zations such as MJA has improved, our self confidence and self esteem has enhanced, consulting with each other, making motivation for myself and others, to increase rural women's information and job creation for rural women's to improve their household economy, such as : mushroom and saffron cultivation, producing flowers and animal husbandry; setting up more educational classes on agriculture, animal husbandry, communication and participation issues and forming rural women's cooperatives and micro credit funds.

Regarding force field analysis of the project, rural female facilitators mentioned the following as driving forces:

Hope, motivation, participation, honor and truthfulness, close relation with managers, improvement of the rural women's life, villages' progress and rural women's participation

RFFs raised the following as preventive forces:

Hopelessness and despair, legal obstacles, cultural and tribal fanaticism, people's low participation and trust, lack proper planning, insufficient budget and lack of lifelong and continuous education.

To draw the vision of the facilitators' project in 2022 facilitators explained:

- It will change the wrong observations of women.

- Women's self reliance will be increased by performing different projects.

- Facilitators groups will join BROW and will do different activities themselves.

Based upon force field analysis, vision drawing and other techniques facilitators raised some suggestions and action plans.

- Identifying the positive and negative points in village.

- Do their best to solve people's problems.

- To get familiar with laws.

- Thinking together and consulting with managers.

- Learn from others' experiences.

- Dividing the tasks.

They mentioned some proposals for BROW as well:

- Participation of DWs in facilitators' monthly meetings.

- Creating a permanent channel for getting and diffusing information.
- Issuing an identification card for facilitators.
- More study visits of other facilitators' works & experiences in other provinces.
- Providing a permanent place for women's activities in village.

From research outcomes, project performance in Damavand is nearly better than Varamin. For the former has commenced the project sooner than Varamin. Damavand's facilitators appear to have a better insight into the project's aims. In fact, they have fewer requests from government and less dependent on MJA's development workers. Moreover, they have more voluntary attitudes and beliefs. They also stated more self-driven activities in their own villages.

On the whole, their success may have different reasons such as:

- Damavand has been the first pilot in Tehran province and more attention has been given to the project.
- They have had a better election process, thus, more suitable facilitators have been elected in Damavand.
- The project in Damavand has been initiated sooner than Varamin.
- The project's extension officer in Damavand is a permanent staff. Moreover, she is a local resident herself.
- The Damavand extension officer has attended in some project's training workshops regarding facilitation, while the Varamin extension officer could not attend the workshops.
- Damavand's rural facilitators have had more training and experiences.

Having discussed the above issues, it needs more inquiry to get a better insight.

***Focused group discussion with the relevant development workers in MJA***

A focused group discussion was conducted for relevant extension officers from Damavand, Varamin, Tehran and one officer responsible for the project in the headquarters, including the researchers themselves.

Within this meeting an attempt was made to mainly focus on issues raised in Damavand and

Varamin meetings with rural facilitators. It was planned to assess the project from relevant extension officers involved in the project as well. From the outset, the meeting was conducted in such a way that it was not only an appraisal of the project but also a two- way communication and learning forum for all participants.

At first they mentioned project's significant impacts on rural people as following:

- Increase of their information, self steam, self reliance and self belief
- Enhancement of rural women's activities and their more participation in community
- Transferring the problems and educational needs to relevant managers.

From their opinion the most important reasons brought about the above changes are:

Facilitators' proper communication with local people, project's participatory nature, facilitator's participation and role and MJA project functionaries specially field workers.

Then they mentioned the effects of the project on themselves as:

- It has enhanced their knowledge.
- It has improved their communication with local people and among themselves.

It has had effects on their personal life and they are aware of the changes in themselves.

Regarding project's force-field analysis they pointed out the following factors as driving forces:

Educations and visits for facilitators and extension officers, permanent communication between facilitators and functionaries, encouraging the facilitators and preparing the ground for electing the suitable rural facilitators.

Pertaining preventing factors they raised the following:

Complicated bureaucracy, non encouraging environment, low budget, no educational programs for facilitators, lack of permanent female personnel to create communication with women facilitators, frequent management changes, provincial dependency to central budget, managers' low collaboration with female staff and managers' low belief and appreciation of women's activities.

During the focused group discussion some key points were raised by the participants:

One of the participants stated that “the budget is not enough for continuing the project and it will affect the project's performance”. Another development worker argued that “due to the project's participatory nature, it takes long time and its effects aren't visible in a short time so the senior managers less appreciate and value it”. In the flow of discussion it was realized that the meetings for electing the local facilitators have been too fast and some of the local people have not been aware of the meetings and its purpose. Conversely, if one wishes to allocate more time s/he faces shortage of vehicles for missions and insufficient personnel.

Unfortunately the bureaucracy system in Iran is an obstacle in the way of planning participatory development. This system, in various reasons such as centralized power locus, and top – down planning and low motivation, makes it difficult to carry out participatory projects in such an environment.

Other important problem which was mentioned in the meeting is the frequent changes of managers. New managers aren't familiar with the projects. Since they are not aware of the activities, the projects may be overlooked and officers involved get discouraged.

One of the other issues raised during the meeting is the managers' interests in presenting show cases. Therefore they prefer to focus on projects which have immediate and concrete results rather than participatory projects which take long time and less tangible outcomes.

**CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION**

This participatory action research has been conducted to examine factors affecting the rural female facilitators' project in Tehran Province. The project has started in Damavand and Varamin counties since 2002. The inquiry has been carried out in such away that was more an appreciative mode of action research. It has been a learning forum and change for all stakeholders including researchers as facilitators of this educational process. Reality is not what we see as experts 'over there'; rather it is obtained by subject– subject relation between the researcher and the researched. Having had a subject – subject relation with all relevant participants we arrived at the following main driving and preventing forces in the way of the rural female facilitators’ project in Tehran Province.

On the whole, proper election of the RFFs, and the simultaneous participatory training of both RFFs and the relevant extension officers and managers should be emphasized as an assurance for the project’s success. Moreover, gender-sensitive approaches can not ignore men. To facilitate authentic rural women’s empowerment a more gender-balanced approach should be employed through project’s different phases such as: design, implementation and evaluation.

Table 1: Main driving forces from RFFs & extension staff's views

From RFFs’ view	From extension staff’s view
Motivation & participation Communication with managers Visiting successful projects Training	Staff’s follow up activities Election of eligible facilitators Training of facilitators and extension staff

Table 2: Main preventing forces from RFFs' & extension staff's views

From RFFs’ view	From extension staff’s view
Cultural & tribal fanaticism Legal obstacles People’s low participation and trust Lack of proper planning Lack of lifelong & continuous education	Complicated bureaucracy Lack of encouragement Lack of continuous training for facilitators Lack of permanent female field worker Continuous management changes

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