

# Feminist Methodological Approach towards Focus Group Interview Research

Layana Aanand

Assistant Professor, Centre for Women's Studies, University of Calicut, Malappuram, Kerala

**Abstract-** In this paper an attempt was made to analyse how focus group discussion can be used as a method of data collection in Feminist Research? How to collect data related to gender using Focus Group discussion? Why feminist researcher use focus group discussion? What all points have to be considered while designing, sampling and moderator control? These objectives were analysed with the help of detailed description and preparations that were done for conducting focus group discussions with a feminist perspective as part of the study conducted in one of the panchayat in Kerala for framing gender budget.

## I INTRODUCTION

In the present scenario gender inclusion is the most discussed term in both academic and non academic arena. Discussion about gender inclusive policies and programmes in society always ends in pin-pointing the need for scientific studies and research in gender issues. In order to address gender related issues new methodological approach has to be incorporated in theoretical research. There comes the significance of feminist approach in research methodology. Feminist Research Methodology is in the continuous process of formulation by serious additions and omissions by traditional research methodological positions.

Feminist Research Methodology is an epistemological intervention to make change in the existing gender relations. In that sense Feminist Research is radical, which question the existing system and there by creates new methods to address the gender issues. So questioning is the main tool adopted in Feminist Research. It question sexist approaches in the traditional research methodology and epistemology in general. By raising as many questions it creates new scholarship as a response to other researches which has been conducted till now in the concept of gender (in traditional research). Those who work in feminist methodology is constantly in the process of using existing methods in research in a gender sensitive way and also creating some new methods to combat gender issues in a scientific way.

Data collection methods which is been used in traditional research methodology is been questioned by academicians interested in feminist research methodology, since it has a very crucial role in shaping the entire research. The choice of one method over another is not simply a technical decision, but an epistemological and theoretical one. Feminist research studies give due preference to address the power dynamics that often occurs in researches. Unless the data collection methods are democratic and transparent power hierarchies which may often occur in research couldn't be well addressed. This means that, as feminists considering the use of innovative or unusual

methods, we need (as much as with conventional methods) to be aware of the epistemological commitments and value assumptions they make (Riger, 1992). Focus Group discussion is one of the tools used in research to collect data from a group in general. A focus groups is-at its simplest-"an informal discussion among selected individuals about specific topics" (Beck, Trombetta, and Share, 1986). This method is useful in collecting additional information in order to make existing data more resourceful. Focus Group discussion is one of the frequently used methods to collect data from a group especially in visual media and certain surveys (both governmental and others). And there is a preconceived notion that it's a very simple method of data collection and no expertise and preparations are not needed except good communication skills. In this context comes the relevance of this study.

Kerala is well noted for its remarkable achievement in making local governance effective in Local Self Government Institutions (LSGI's) compared to other Indian states. So many research studies have been taking place in LSGI's to further strengthen the local governance. One such initiative is to frame gender budget. In 2004 Ministry of Women and Child Development (MWCD) recognised Gender Budgeting as an important tool for women's empowerment, and as a way for addressing the observed inequality. "Gender Budgeting is a process that entails incorporating a gender perspective at various stages- planning/ policy/ programme formulation, assessment of needs of target groups, allocation of resources, implementation, impact assessment, reprioritization of resources". In order to achieve this goal Government of India has adopted many measures for incorporating gender sensitive approach to the budgeting process. It was in the concern an action research was planned to assist those panchayats which shows willingness to adopt gender budgeting as a pilot study.

Many methods have been used to collect data for the study. As a first step women's status study was conducted to assess the status of women in that particular panchayat. For this a structured questionnaire was prepared to collect the data. In order to strengthen women's status study data, gender analysis of institutions that comes under the control of panchayat, gender analysis of the previous year's budget, review of previous year's women component plan, focus group interview among various identified sectors, secondary data collected from register office, passport office and other institutions were also carried out. The entire research was planned to be conducted by people of the concerned panchayat itself, in order to make the people aware about the significance of gender needs while framing the budget. So making people convinced about the seriousness of the project and to make them actively involved in the research process was the real issue which I have to face.

In this paper an attempt was made to analyse how focus group discussion can be used as a method of data collection in Feminist Research? How to collect data related to gender using Focus Group discussion? Why feminist researcher use focus group discussion? What all points have to be considered while designing, sampling and moderator control? These objectives were analysed with the help of detailed description and preparations that were done for conducting focus group discussions with a feminist perspective as part of the study conducted in one of the panchayat in Kerala for framing gender budget.

## II THE PRACTICE OF FEMINIST FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEW RESEARCH

Focus groups differ from in-depth interviews in that multiple respondents are interviewed together in a group setting. Focus group is one of the effective methods used in community programs. Other part is that focus group discussion is used as an additional method to collect data which could not be covered by in-depth interviews and quantitative surveys. As part of Women's Status Study which has been conducted in the selected Panchayats of Kerala, focus group discussion was conducted in order to collect additional information which couldn't be covered by various data collection methods. Due care was given to conduct maximum number of focus group discussions in each sector to get additional information considering the nature of panchayat. This exercise was done in order to get detailed information regarding the status of women in particular panchayat and there by incorporating these identified issues into panchayat budget as an attempt to solve these issues. This study brought the actual condition of women in each panchayat.

Kitzinger (1994) shows that focus group interviews are particularly helpful in gaining data from "difficult" populations. By "difficult" Kitzinger is referring to people who may feel disenfranchised, unsafe, or otherwise weary of participating in a research study. Additionally, focus groups are useful in accessing the attitudes, feelings, and experiences of groups who have been marginalized or silenced within society. In that sense woman being a marginalized and silenced group within the society focus group discussion can be considered as one of the method which can be adopted to collect data in feminist research.

- **How are focus groups useful in gaining knowledge from marginalized groups?**

Focus group interview was conducted among women who work in unorganised sector in a particular panchayat. In one of the panchayat selected for the study majority of women were engaged in the work of coir making from coconut husk fibres as cottage industry. Since there are lot of backwaters and small canals in that panchayat, most of the houses have small scale coir industry associated with it. Most of the people belong to lower class and mainly women of each family were associated with this work, were men work in other fields. Most women do this work as an extension of household chores. Even high class families are also engaged in coir making, but they used to heir women of lower class/caste for this. From the questionnaire administered in the panchayat to collect data regarding women's status data's regarding occupational hazardous and diseases were not fully drawn, for this a focus group interview

was conducted in panchayat among women engaged in coir making.

In order to organise a focus group interview to fix a convenient time was the major problem which I faced. But somehow women cooperated to fix a common time since they were very much enthusiastic because it was for the first time they get an invitation to participate in a meeting. In the first focus group interview I played the role of moderator and since I was an outsider some sort of problem was happening and so women didn't open up freely. Since we couldn't continue the interview much longer because of rain, I felt that it was real blessing to our study since I got much more time to reorganise the entire thing. So I felt that a woman from their area has to play the role of moderator in order to avoid the issues of outsider-insider conflict which make them uncomfortable to share their issues. Woman elected representative of that panchayat, who is also a coir worker were selected to serve the role of moderator and she was given training to moderate the discussion while sticking to themajor research objectives. And I was reporting the whole process and it helped a lot to reduce the power hierarchy. Even though initially women have some problem in opening up their issues, but eventually they began to participate actively in the discussion.

The meeting was conducted in one of the work site of women which also created a pleasant atmosphere for data collection. After the interview a sense of solidarity began to develop among the women coir workers when they realise that they share common problems. The outcome of that focus group interview was really stronger than our perceived objectives. Those women who participated in the focus group interview began to mobilise other women coir workers of that area began to discuss about their issues to other women and began to function as a pressure group and to claim for their rights in grama sabha and other decision making bodies. They even start raising their issues in their workers union and even began to claim for women representatives in the workers union. In that way this kind of group interaction and narrative that occurs within focus group interviews helps the researcher who is interested in addressing subjugated knowledge and thereby creating new models which would give further insights into framing and conducting further researches.

By analysing the above mentioned study one can understand that sudden involvement of an outsider could disturb the whole process of data collection in focus group method. Even including me all were women even then some sort of hierarchies began to work which disturbs the democratic atmosphere of research process. It helps such to reveals the fact that hierarchy can even work among same sex, it show the actual impact of class, caste, regional and other differences in establishing the power dynamics between the researcher and researched. At the same time same sex even contributed in collecting data since all were women and even moderator is also one among them problem in speaking in group was solved to some extent. The instructions were even given to moderator to make each and every person speak was the another strategy used in order to reduce the power dynamics. So it created a sort of belief among the responded that we are giving attention to each and every one's problem also contributed to the success of the study. So here group dynamics help us to make the data more resourceful. The group environment also helps one to feel that all of their issues

are equally addressed. Likewise, the group interaction also gives courage to respondents to raise voices and challenge issues which were naturalised by the society in general. These were some of the feminist strategies adopted in focus group discussion which can be considered as the major element which deals with the success of the study.

Another observation which can be drawn from the analysis of above mentioned study is that focus group discussion can be used as an effective tool to get detailed information which is not covered in-depth interview and other data's collected from the sources. Along with that I have also given due care in selecting the respondents, nature of respondents and the role of moderator.

### III FEMINIST APPROACH IN DESIGNING THE FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEW

#### Sampling

Sampling refers to who the members of our focus group will be. This has to be done very carefully since it is one of the major aspects in focus group or in any other research. Feminists give due importance in the selection of the sample since their major intension to bring the issues of marginalised/disenfranchised section into the fore front. In the above mentioned study due care was given to include women from all sectors of the society, in order to bring the issues of each section who are engaged in coir making. Even in higher class and higher caste families coir making is considered as an extension of women's house hold job and the marketing and other issues associated with this cottage industry were managed by male members. While in lower class/ caste families whole work is being managed by women itself. So all women engaged in coir making were included as sample irrespective of their caste/class. This was done in order to get different dimensions of the issues from each and every section in order to maintain the holistic perspective. Likewise, nature of respondents were given due preference even though only 20 women were included in the focus group interview. So homogeneity among the respondents was maintained by carefully selecting the respondents for the study.

#### Role of moderator

How one moderator the discussion is also very important in feminist research? So in order to make the environment comfortable due care was given to make the whole atmosphere democratic. It was with this intension one among them was selected to play the role of moderator thereby reducing the gap between researched and researcher. It helps to reduce the power hierarchies in the whole process of research. By incorporating researched into the research process is done in order to make the research process rich in true sense reflecting the lived experience and real demands in general, which is one of the feminist research stand point. In order to bring out the subjugated knowledge lower level of moderation can be used as an effective method.

#### Knowledge regarding the intension of the research

Another major strategy used in feminist research is to make the researched aware about the intension of the study. By disclosing the aim and objectives of the study, cooperation and interest of the researched could be raised. Here in order to

make the study effective researched were given a major role even in framing their needs into the whole process of the study. Researched were involved even in interpretation of the data which make the whole research process democratic. After the compilation of the data researched prepare projects to solve the issues which have been identified by them.

#### Formulating Research Question

Formulating research question plays a significant position in feminist research. Here in the above mentioned study research questions were formulated by researched and researcher together. In that way entire process was made clear to the researched that helps a lot in neutralising the power hierarchy within the entire process of research, which is also a method of feminist research. Making the whole process known to researched is the method which can be used in feminist research to increases the effectiveness of the research. So here researched is given equal importance as that of researched which is one of the factor that leads to the success of the study. By adopting this method the capacities of the researched in finding solutions to their own problems could be developed and which in turn fosters their talents and vision. Here due care was given to the group activity and thereby making them capable enough to address their issues by themselves. So by involving researched in the research process the liberation of researched is taking place which is the main aim of feminist research. By engaging the researched in each and every process of research leads to empowerment of researched, which is the ultimate aim of feminist research.

### IV CONCLUSION

In conclusion focus group interview can be used as one of the methods of feminist research which is always considered as insignificant method in social sciences. How one approach and frame the focus group interview is all that matters. If properly planned some of the issues that often occurs in data collection such as artificiality, exploitation and power dynamics between the researcher and the researched could be reduced to some extent. This will ultimately leads to the consciousness raising, liberation and empowerment of both researched and researcher. The issues identified in this study were put together to frame projects visioning towards gender budgeting. In general, focus group method is well suited to research questions involving the elicitation and clarification of perspectives, the construction and negotiation of meanings, the generation and elaboration of hypotheses, and a whole range of exploratory analyses. It needs to harness "varied epistemological forces from empiricism and materialism to utopianism and postmodernism, in order to construct *feminist science*" (Morawski and Agronick 1991,575), and it needs to demonstrate a commitment to "developing and testing innovative concepts, methods and applications for understanding and empowering women" (Russo 1995,1). The continued use and development of focus group method offer feminist research an excellent opportunity in the near future.

#### REFERENCES

1. Beck, L., W. Trombetta, and S. Share. (1986). Using focus group sessions before decisions are made. *North Carolina Medical Journal*, 47: 73-74.
2. Biber, S. N. H. and Leavy, P. L. (2007). *Feminist Research Practice: A Primer*, London: Sage Publication.

3. Kitzinger, J. (1994). The methodology of focus groups: The important of interaction between research participants. *Sociology of Health and Illness*, 16(1), 103-121.
4. Morawski, J.G., and G. Agronick. 1991. A restive legacy: The history of feminist work in experimental and cognitive psychology. *Psychology of Women Quarterly* 15: 567-79.
5. Riger, S. 1992. Epistemological debates, feminist voices: Science, social values, and the study of women. *American Psychologist* 47: 730-40.
6. Russo, N.F. 1995. Editorial: PWQ: A scientific voice in feminist psychology. *Psychology of Women Quarterly* 19: 1-3.

#### AUTHOR

**Layana Aanand**, M.A. Women's Studies & B.Ed, Assistant Professor, Centre for Women's Studies, University of Calicut, Malappuram, Kerala . layanaanand@gmail.com