THE ROLE OF PARTICIPATORY COMMUNITY FILMMAKING IN FOSTERING COMMUNITY EMPOWERMENT IN RURAL SRI LANKA

Ileka Ruwanpathirana[1]*

[1]Department of Mass Communication, University of Kelaniya, Sri Lanka
*Corresponding author: ilekah@kln.ac.lk

Abstract

Community media has long been recognized as a participatory approach to communication that empowers marginalized communities by enabling them to represent their own experiences and aspirations. While global scholarship has examined diverse community-media practices, Sri Lankan research has predominantly focused on community radio and its contribution to community and national development. Participatory community filmmaking, however, remains critically understudied both theoretically and empirically, with limited application in the Sri Lankan context. Addressing this gap, this study investigates how participatory community filmmaking fosters empowerment in a rural Sri Lankan context through the Yakunnawa Village Community Film Project initiated by the Department of Mass Communication, University of Kelaniya. Guided by a constructivist-interpretivist paradigm, the study employed a qualitative single-case study design, with Zimmerman's multi-level empowerment framework providing the theoretical foundation for the analysis. Data were collected from October 2024 to February 2025, covering all stages from initial community engagement to post-project follow-up, through semi-structured interviews with 10 purposively selected community members representing diverse demographic backgrounds, roles, and levels of involvement; participant observation involving more than 50 community members; document analysis; and visual analysis. The data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis to identify empowerment outcomes across individual, organizational, and community levels. The findings reveal that participatory community filmmaking generated multidimensional empowerment. At the individual level, participants developed technical and communication skills, confidence, self-expression, critical media literacy, and cultural pride. At the organizational level, the collaborative filmmaking process facilitated shared participation, intergenerational collaboration, peer learning, dialogue, collective decision-making, and collective achievement. At the community level, the initiative enhanced community visibility, strengthened social cohesion, expanded technological capacity, and created potential for continued community participation. Overall, the findings demonstrate how community members transitioned from passive media consumers to active storytellers capable of shaping their own narratives. The study concludes that participatory community filmmaking is more than a creative effort; it empowers individuals and communities by enabling express themselves, use their cultural assets for something meaningful, and actively shape their social realities. The study further suggest that participatory community filmmaking offers a potentially transferable approach to community-driven development and cultural expression in comparable rural contexts.

Keywords: Community filmmaking, Community empowerment, Rural development, Sri Lanka