

NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT THROUGH WOMEN EMPOWERMENT

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Abstract

Women, world over, have been victims of gender discrimination and gross injustice and have always been at the receiving end, in all spheres of life. Discrimination against women was the result of a hidden economic structure which had essentially been defined in relation to the way in which surplus labor was extracted from the producing classes. Although, things have changed over a period of time, women are yet to find a space and position as far as policy making and decisions are concerned. Through this paper we try to explore why empowerment of women is crucial for the growth of a country like India and the need to involve women in major policy decisions relating to the development of a nation. The paper further highlights the interrelatedness between women and nature and how the intrinsic knowledge that women possess can be utilized for managing climate change and bringing about sustainable development. We also try to identify the numerous ways by which women could contribute to the social, political and economic growth of a nation, because of the uniqueness of their gender.

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INTRODUCTION

Discrimination against women was the result of a hidden economic structure inherent in society, a structure which had essentially been defined in relation to the way in which surplus labor was extracted from the producing classes. Only recently has historical materialism made clear that the appropriation of surplus by the ruling hierarchies was possible to a great extent because of a large amount of unpaid women's labor, which was extracted through the family, the economic unit of class society. The sources of discrimination against women may be found in the appropriation of surplus labor. Forms of discrimination varied considerably in different cultures and periods, under the influence of development of ethnic factors, natural conditions and outside influences. But the economic basis that determined discrimination was generally the same. In order that half of humanity be channeled from birth into a reduced set of social functions to provide free labor to the male sex and ruling classes, women were coerced into confusing their economic function with their biological and psychological identity, to justify or at least tolerate the legal structure that turned them into private property and the culture that disciplined them into passivity. In the vast majority of cases, the man with his wages became the 'provider' for the whole family. The women's invisible work was no longer considered labor, it was merely housework which was necessary but having no economic significance. The economy has been defined as the production and distribution of commodities, and women apparently have been excluded from the scope of that definition. For a long time, women have been subordinated to men in all aspects of life because they have lacked direct access to economic resources on the same basis of men. Women have had to seek indirect access to economic resources through their personal relations with men, and the resulting dependence has put them at a great disadvantage. Through the 19th C, women were denied access to economic resources by law and custom. They could not learn or practice most trades or profession, borrow or make contracts. Their only way of achieving a comfortable standard of living, a respectable status and a decently provided for motherhood, was by taking up the occupation of a housewife.

The liberation of women from exclusive domesticity did not originate in feminist books or feminist movements, but the rising enrollment of women in the paid labor forces of the developed world was a straightforward consequence of the Industrial Revolution of over two

hundred years ago. Ever since, the changes in women's economic role has been unfolding gradually, as a result of long –standing tendencies in the economy and the society. Progress has been made in the labor market, the gap in the average pay between men and women has narrowed significantly and the presence of women in the professional and managerial ranks has increased markedly. Yet, men still retain a highly disproportionate share of the best jobs. Women's wages have been and continue to be considerably lower than men's, but they are a lot higher than what they used to be. These higher wages have made the time of millions of women too valuable to be devoted entirely to homemaking.

WOMEN EMPOWERMENT – ECONOMIC

Women empowerment implies the ability of women to participate as equal partners in the cultural, social, economic and political systems of a society. Even though the world economy has developed into a global one, in both developed and developing countries, women have been suppressed in all walks of life for generations. Women empowerment is far easier said than done. While women work long hours every day at home, since this work does not produce a remuneration it is often ignored in the accounting of the respective contributions of women and men in the family's joint prosperity.¹ However, when a woman works outside the house and the employed woman earns a wage, her contribution to the family's prosperity is more visible. She has also more say in family matters because of being less dependent on others. Hence, any attempt to improve the economy, slow down population growth or arrest environmental degradation requires sincere and sustained efforts to involve women, as economic development can be achieved through their empowerment. To help women attain economic independence is an essential step towards empowering them. Respect and regard for women's well-being is strongly influenced by such variables as women's ability to earn an independent income, to find employment outside the home, have ownership rights, education and involvement in the decision making process within and outside the family.

¹Amartya sen. *Development as Freedom*. [New Delhi:OUP,2000]p.194

Empowerment of women becomes all the more crucial for a country like India where women's daily lives are often difficult, burdened by unwanted and dangerous child-bearing; lack of proper nutrition; high levels of responsibility for their families; poor and dangerous living conditions; exposure to violence –social and domestic-all affecting their health and well being. The poverty trap, created through the vicious cycle of 'development', debt, environmental destruction and structural adjustment, is most significantly experienced by women and children.² Amartya Sen, in his book 'Development as Freedom', vehemently argues for gender policies that focus on women's capability and agency rather than, as is conventional, on women's disadvantaged levels of functioning . He clearly reasons out that women's work at home, does not produce remuneration, however exhaustive the household chores might be. But when work is done outside the home and wages earned, a woman's contribution to the family's prosperity is more visible. Moreover, the freedom that goes with paid labor brings important values for women, such as self-esteem, dignity and autonomy. 'Freedom in one area[that of being able to work outside the household] seems to help foster freedom in others[in enhancing freedom from hunger, illness and relative deprivation]'³

One reason for the relatively low participation of women in day-to-day economic affairs in many countries is a relative lack of access to economic resources. It is much harder for a woman to venture into even small scale business enterprises, given the lack of collateral resources. Muhammad Yunus' experiences in Bangladesh would be a typical example in this regard. Women, at one point of time in Bangladesh, weren't even given loans without the approval of the male members of the family. Yunus' experiments with women and micro-credit and the success of the Grameen Bank in Bangladesh, have now become part of history. Yunus himself testifies that the remarkable record of the Bank, lies in the high rate of repayment[which is close to 98%], with respect to women, who are its main customers. Movements like these have played a major role in enhancing the status of women and thus contributing to the economic development of communities. Thus, our argument is that ,economic empowerment, coupled with

² Vandana Shiva & Maria Mies. *Ecofeminism*. [New Delhi: Rawat Publications.2010]P.79

³ Amartya Sen.*Development as Freedom*. p.194

institutional support[legal and government] goes a long way in enhancing the status of women in society.

SOCIAL

Earning an independent income has a clear impact on enhancing the social standing of a woman, at home and in the society. Employment has educational effects, exposing women to the developments in the outside world. It also enables them to provide adequate nutrition and health care facilities to their children and family. The changes in women's lives, which employment has brought about, is clearly visible not only in the work place, but also in schools and all other aspects related to an individual's life. There is sufficient data to prove that women's education and literacy tend to reduce the mortality rates of children. Influenced by education and employment, women can influence the nature of the public discussion on a variety of social subjects, including acceptable fertility rates and environmental priorities.⁴

Mean number of children per women in age-group 45-49 years and percentage change during 1991-2001 : India

Educational level of women	Mean No. of CEB (45-49)		Change during 1991-2001(%)	TFR 2001
	2001	1991		
1	2	3	4	5
1. All educational levels	3.8	4.3	-10.1	2.52
2. Illiterate	4.2	4.4	-4.9	3.09
3. Literate	3.3	3.8	-14.6	2.02
4. Literate but below middle	3.7	4.3	-13.7	2.37
5. Middle but below matric	3.3	3.8	-14.0	2.09
6. Matriculate but below graduate	2.7	3.0	-8.5	1.67
7. Graduate and above	2.1	2.3	-7.0	1.35

Note : CEB means Children Ever Born and TFR means Total Fertility Rate.

Education also helps women to have a wider vision, and spread awareness regarding family planning measures. Literate women do have greater liberty in decisions relating to fertility and child birth. A classic example in this regard would be the case of Kerala, the most socially

⁴ Census Data 2001.

advanced state in India, where fertility reduction has been a success. The state's high level of female literacy has been particularly influential in bringing about a decline in birth rate.

Within the family, there are also issues of division of food, health care and other provisions. The arrangements for sharing within the family are given, to a great extent, by established conventions to women, but they are also influenced by factors such as the economic role and empowerment of women and the value systems of the community at large.⁵ There has always been a gender bias in the distribution of food within poor families. This anti-female bias seems to be influenced by the social standing and economic power of women in general. There is considerable evidence to illustrate that when women can and do earn income outside the household, it enhances the position of women with respect to distribution within the household.

Women have always donned the role of 'care-givers' of the family. Hence, conservation of natural resources, nurturing the environment and maintaining ecological balance too, come naturally to them. Women in India are an intimate part of nature, because of their ability to create and conserve life. "All ecological societies of forest-dwellers and peasants, whose life is organized on the principle of sustainability and the reproduction of life in all its richness, also embody the feminine principle."⁶ Rural women, who work in the forest, the field and the river, create sustenance in quiet but essential ways. It is this invisible work, done in close association with nature, which helps them in balancing the ecological cycle and sustain human life by providing the family with the basic requirements like food, water, firewood and nutrition. It is this balance that gets impacted in the process of 'development'. Women's productivity has been most developed and evolved in managing the integrity of ecological cycles in forestry and agriculture. They transfer fertility from the forests to the crops and to animals. Animal waste is used as fertilizer for crops and crop by-products are fed to animals. They are aware of the feed value of different fodder species and the fuel value of firewood types. In low input agriculture, fertility is transferred from forest and farm trees to the field by women's work, either directly or via animals. Women's expertise in the Dairy Industry has been of immense benefit in rural India.

⁵ Jean Dreze & Amartya Sen. *The Political Economy of Hunger*. [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990]

⁶ Vandana Shiva. *Women in Nature-The Women, Gender and Development Reader*. [USA: Zed Books, 1997] P.62

Women's work and knowledge is central to biodiversity conservation and utilization, both because, they work between sectors and perform multiple tasks. Water locations are often feminine spaces and water chores are the tasks of women, although these involvements most often do not translate into their participation in decision-making.⁷ In spite of women playing a major role in the provision, management and safe guarding of water, they are excluded from the sustainability agenda. Economists tend to discount women's work as 'production' because it falls outside the so-called 'production boundary'. Gender studies now being published, confirm that women in India are major producers of food in terms of value, volume and hours worked. In most cultures, women have been the custodians of bio-diversity. They produce, reproduce, consume and conserve bio-diversity in agriculture. However, in common with all other aspects of women's work and knowledge, their role in the development and conservation of bio-diversity has been rendered as non-work and non-knowledge. Their labor and expertise has been defined into nature, even though it is based on sophisticated cultural and scientific practices. But women's bio-diversity conservation differs from the dominant patriarchal notion of bio-diversity conservation. Involving women in policy decisions related to all aspects of man's social life- be it health, child care, nutrition, infant mortality, environment etc. would go a long way in contributing to the healthy growth of a nation.

POLITICAL

Women have always been in the forefront of political struggles, ever since the Independence Movement and have been at the centre of people's campaigns, protest activities and grassroots movements of various kinds. In spite of all this, women have failed to find a larger space in the political system of Independent India. There is plenty of evidence that when women get the opportunities that are typically the preserve of men, they are capable of succeeding equally well, as illustrated through the examples of Benazir Bhutto, Sheikh Hasina and Indira Gandhi. But even these political figures have been able to make inroads into the political field, only because their husbands or fathers have been established and accepted as leaders. There is an immediate

⁷ Kuntala Lahiri Dutt. *Fluid Bonds- Views on Gender and Water*. [Kolkata: Stree, 2006] P.9

need to pay more attention to this aspect, to bring in more women into leadership roles, knowing the contributions that they can make towards nation-building.

The Indian Constitution guarantees to all women the fundamental right to equality[Article 14], equal voting rights and political participation for both men and women. As reflected in the Preamble, the Indian Constitution is firmly grounded in the principles of liberty, fraternity, equality and justice and contains a number of provisions for the empowerment of women. Women's right to equality and non-discrimination are defined as justifiable fundamental rights[Article 15] and there is enough room for affirmative action programmes for women. Equality of opportunity, in matters relating to employment or appointment to any office under the State is a fundamental right[Article 16]. The Directive Principles of State Policy stresses on the right to an adequate means of livelihood for both men and women equally[Article 39a], equal pay for equal work for both men and women[Article 39d], provision for just and humane conditions of work and for maternity relief[Article 39e]. Directives for promoting harmony and renouncing practices derogatory to the dignity of women are also provided for in the Indian Constitution. The political rights of women are recognized without any discrimination, or distinction and they have the right to participate in decision making at all levels equally with men. The right to constitutional equality has been supplemented by legal equality, by implementing a number of Acts through which the traditional inequalities with respect to marriage, divorce and rights are sought to be eliminated. However, in spite of these constitutional and legal provisions, the ground reality is that women have not obtained adequate and proportionate representation in the legislative and other decision-making bodies.

The policies followed by successive governments in independent India have not been conducive to the participation of women in public life. The failure of women to find a larger space in the political system of independent India needs to be understood in the light of a dominant patriarchy-both public and private. Women's participation particularly and their role in decision making in the world of public affairs is not equal to men's and few have reached positions of power and leadership. Countless studies, beginning with the Report of CSWI[Committee on the status of Women in India 1974] have dealt on the reasons for women's poor participation, both in quantitative and qualitative terms. Explanations include a list of structural barriers and cultural

norms such as household and childcare responsibilities, a traditional gender division of labor, conservative familial attitudes, male dominance in family and community, illiteracy and lack of skills. There are also other factors that compound women's so-called 'backwardness', such as criminalization of politics and the gate keeping techniques of excluding women from political parties and trade unions. And the final deterrent has been identified as the State itself. Half hearted measures, regressive ideologies underlie state programmes for women, gender insensitivity of government functionaries, and submission to forces inimical to women's right and status have all led to women's movements confrontation with the state, on many occasions. One indication of the prevailing inequality between men and women in politics is clearly reflected in the negligible number of women in the State Assemblies and Parliament.⁸

Various strategies have been proposed to further the political representation of women in India. From a reservation of 33% seats at various levels including the Parliament, it has also been suggested that political parties reserve 33% of their seats for women in the elections. However, mere presence of women in Parliament, even if greater in number will not mean much unless they are truly representative of women's concerns covering all categories. In the ongoing debate about reservation of seats for women in the Parliament, it has been pointed out that an undifferentiated reservation for women will reinforce the existing inequalities in women's access to positions of power. It is argued by those in favor of reservation, that there is no doubt that democracy representation will be strengthened with compulsorily more presence of women through reservation. This is evident from the impact of the implementation of 33% reservation of seats for women in the local bodies [panchayats] in India by the 73rd Constitutional amendment as a result of which the representation of women in the formal structures of governance at the local level has recorded a steady increase. In August 2009, the Cabinet approved 50% reservation for women at the Panchayat level by amending Article 243[D] of the Constitution. "Enhancing reservation for women in Panchayats, will facilitate more women to enter public sphere. This would lead to further empowerment of women and make Panchayats more inclusive institutions, improve governance and public service delivery."⁹ There has been a remarkable advance of

⁸ Brinda Karat. *Survival and Emancipation*. [New Delhi: Three Essays Collective, 2005] p.130.

⁹ Ambika Soni, *The Hindu*, August 2009.

women in public life, particularly women from economically and socially oppressed sections. The law for reservations in panchayats and local bodies, by enabling the entry of an estimated one million women into electoral politics at the local level has hit hard at prevailing social notions of a woman's place.¹⁰ Women's presence at the grassroots levels of decision making will not only enhance the status of women but will also strengthen democratic traditions and make democracy more meaningful in fighting injustice and oppression while at the same time help to bring a different, explicitly female perspective to the political arena. This is well evident with respect to Kerala, which has 50% reservation for women at the Panchayat level. Unless women are brought into the decision-making levels directly, important issues related to women will never be tackled with the seriousness they require.

Empowerment is not just about how oppressive ideologies are thrown off, but about changes in access to and control over resources of various kinds[material, cultural and intellectual], all of which are influenced by diverse forces like caste, religion, sexual harassment, rights to property and a range of other questions. It is also linked to social movements that mobilize populations. It has been argued by some that mobilization is always towards specific causes and is therefore sporadic and short-lived. True as this may be, the very experience of being part of a movement, however short-lived, is bound to contribute to the politicization of women, Especially in providing them with opportunities to move outside conventionally prescribed boundaries. Therefore, instead of confining our understanding of female empowerment to women occupying decision making positions alone, other intangible but real modes of women's politicization must be included. In a century which has seen unprecedented change, revolution and innovation, the most pervasive and lasting transformation will be the emergence of women as a major force in public life, the world over.

¹⁰ Brinda Karat. *Survival and Emancipation*. p.125

CONCLUSION

“If the goals of economic development include improved standards of living, removal of poverty, access to dignified employment and reduction in inequality, then it is quite natural to start with women.”¹¹ Nothing is as important today in the political economy of development as the appropriate recognition of political, economic and social participation and leadership of women. The extent of participation of women in decision making is in fact, a measure of empowerment and strengthening the quality of civil life. Family being the basic unit of the State, women play a unique role in contributing to national development. They are also able to transfer the benefits of their own education and advancement to the family and thus multiply the effect of the benefits. Women’s voice, influenced by education and employment, can in turn influence the nature of public discussion on a variety of social subjects, including acceptable fertility rates and environmental priorities. Access to land and women’s right to own property are fundamental issues that needs to be addressed to further enhance the social status of women. The legal system too has to be made more quick and efficient, so that there isn’t much delay in delivering justice. The concept of gender budgeting has to be taken seriously by the government and has to implemented effectively in conjunction with an egalitarian and democratic vision. As more and more women enter the job market to gain economic independence, it also calls for a shift in the roles played by men within a family, so far. Both men and women will have to take part in this work – in the refashioning of our habits and institutions so that they are just, comfortable and safe. Under these circumstances, “women could become active agents of change, the dynamic promoters of social transformations that can alter the lives of both women and men.”¹²

¹¹ Muhammad Yunus. *Banker to the Poor*. [India: Penguin Books, 1999] p.122

¹² Amartya Sen. *Development as Freedom*. p.189

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