

WOMEN, DEVELOPMENT AND POLICY: CHANGING FEMINIST PERSPECTIVES IN INDIA

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The progress of nations is increasingly being judged by the well being of their people, the opportunities to earn a fair reward for their labour and ability to participate in decisions that affect them rather than their economic or military strength. It is widely accepted now that development processes in many parts of the world including India had neglected women. In 1972 the United Nations declared 1975 to be the International Year of the Women. The reaction of women over the world led them to question: was this an admission that everything else was the Year of the Man? (Steinem, 1985: 279). This marks a turning point in the story of women's progress towards freedom and equality. A strange uniformity of pattern exists in the struggle of women whether in Asia, Africa, America or Europe. The prejudices and obstacles in the path of progress that women have to surmount seem almost identical. It is this which makes the women's struggle not a national one but an international humanist movement. History documents that, 'we talk of revolutions, political and economic. And yet the greatest revolution in a country is the one that affects the status and living conditions of its women' (Nehru, 1957).

The contemporary development processes are still undergoing transformation to accommodate and structure their policy debates with gender-justice in mind. If feminism is viewed as a protest against women's oppression there is no confining it within the narrow boundaries of country, culture or time. Feminism seeks for women the same opportunities and privileges the society gives to men; it asserts the distinctive value of womanhood against patriarchal denigration (Young,

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1990; 85). It is in this broad context that development policies are being recast to relate to the changing feminist perspectives in India.

The Feminist Movement and Development

Development signifies a broad-based progressive movement synonymous with growth, modernization, industrialization, self-reliance, social change, culminating in national development. It is a widely participatory process of social change in a society, intended to be about both social and material advancement including greater equality, freedom and other valued qualities for the majority of the people through gaining greater control over their environment (Rogers, 1976:33). Development is thus a multi-dimensional evolution on the social, economic, political, cultural, ecological and human planes.

Development initiated transformation in lifestyles has led to a period of transition from tradition to modernity in different parts of the world. The women's movement rose as an ideological reaction to the conditions of life in which old patterns and ideals were rendered untenable. This led women to push for new modes of behaviour and lifestyles in industrial societies. Under the banner of very broad principles such as 'equality,' 'privacy' and 'women's rights' the feminist movement legitimates a variety of innovations that are in women's interest under the changed circumstances of contemporary society. These include programmes like paid maternity leave and day-care centres including radical measures such as the approval of free abortion, sexual freedom, childlessness and reservation in various sectors.

A tradition bound country like India is also witnessing the rise of feminist movements with the winds of liberalisation, privatisation and globalisation sweeping across the region. Liberal feminism seeks to bring about more equitable and just development goals for women by blending tradition as well as modernity. Radical feminism has also begun to strike roots in India. If we try to distil the most extreme or radical goal of the feminist movement, it is the rejection of all division of labour based on sex. The idea allows that women should have the

same opportunities as men, the same occupations and the same privileges. According to this doctrine, any difference in rights and obligations among people should be based on merit, not on sex. Feminist action is sharply divided; one section favours affirmative action or reservation policies to draw greater participation of women in various spheres of development; another section does not favour such approaches because they view it as a weakening of the feminist movement due to the special provisions given to women.

It is clear that despite the egalitarian humanist development manifesto, the economically developed affluent world and the underdeveloped poorer realms reveal that the politics of plenty and the politics of poverty are universally coloured by an age - old discrimination against women, glaring at times, and subtle in most cases. Although discrimination against and exploitation of women are global phenomena their consequences are more tragic in the Third World. Poverty, ignorance, deprivation of the basic necessities of life, and the ever-growing pressures of transition from tradition to modernity - all combine to aggravate the inequities that women in developing countries, including India, suffer to a point at which their existence is reduced to a continuous battle for survival.

The growing indications of several life threatening situations among women in the developing countries such as high maternal mortality and morbidity, severe malnutrition, the widespread incidence of debilitating deficiencies and diseases bringing down their life expectancy are stark revelations of their battle for survival. The need to incorporate gender awareness into development policies was recognised nearly twenty years ago when planners realised that modernization and development of a country without women's participation would be a major handicap.

International efforts

The United Nation's International Women's Decade played an important role in spurring the women's development movement. The stimulating effects of the four UN Women's Conferences and the preparations that went into them lent further impetus in bringing women

across the globe together consciously for amelioration of their state of decadence. In 1975 the UN inaugurated the Women's Decade at a conference in Mexico City, which spurred the 1978 breakthrough of a number of scientific and reflective writings about women and development. As a preparation for the Mid-Decade Conference in Copenhagen in 1980, the UN secretariat attempted to gather statistical information about women's living conditions through public sources from all regions of the world. This was the first attempt at providing a global picture of women's situation. Parallel to the official UN efforts, several alternative conferences organised as grass-roots initiatives brought about greater contact and co-operation between researchers and activists world-wide. These efforts culminated in the Forum, convened in Nairobi in 1985, running simultaneously with the third UN Women's Conference. About 16,000 women met at the Forum to share experiences on women's conditions and evolve strategies to solve the problems of women. In some of the Third world countries, including India, many scientific groups of an activist nature were fighting against the oppression of women in particular, and also against racial discrimination, class and caste dominance. At the fourth World Conference on women held in Beijing in 1995 there was a great focus on reproductive health and population control, which are even vitally linked to the issue of women's development.

The widely accepted international treaty or bill of rights for women is the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) which was ratified by 160 countries in 1997 including India. The CEDAW has evoked resistance from some countries to the concept of full equality for women and provisions ranging from equality in nationality and citizenship, sharing family property and women's participation in the military and the clergy. The general reservations have risen mainly due to the conflict of some provisions of the Convention with existing national, customary or religious law. It is encouraging that some nations have modified or withdrawn their reservations as a result of constructive dialogue with the CEDAW review committee.

From the ultra- feminism of the sixties to the introspection on women's status in the seventies, to women in development in the eighties, and to gender in the nineties, there has been a whole reshaping of paradigms of human development. The conception of the status of women has evolved from a consideration of women's problems to women's issues finally to women's perspectives in development.

Gender Inequality and its Sources

The concept of gender refers to the qualitative and interdependent character of women's and men's position in society. Gender relations are constituted in terms of the relations of power and dominance that govern the lives of women and men. Thus gender divisions are not fixed by biology, but constitute an aspect of wider social division of labour which is rooted in the context of cultural, religious and ideological systems prevailing in a society (Ostergaard, 1992: 6). Many terms have been used synonymously such as 'status of women', 'female autonomy', 'patriarchy', 'sex stratification system', 'women's rights' and 'men's situational advantage', all of which implicitly refer to gender inequality. It is only recently that the 'status of women' found its way into the Indian Population Policy documents (Government of India, 1992). The traditional division of rights and responsibilities in many cultures including India place women in an inferior position socially, economically, legally, and politically which can be changed by political and opinion-shaping influences. A complexity arises from the fact that gender is not always constituted coherently or consistently in different historical contexts and intersects with racial, class, and regional identities. This complexity, especially in India, requires attention from policy framers and appropriate development interventions.

Gender inequality has to be examined in consideration with other forms of inequality defined by class, caste and religion. Women's social class has a strong impact on their economic activities, access to agricultural land, employment opportunities, gender relations within the household, and intra-household resource distribution. Religious conflicts and a desire to establish separate religious identities have increasingly coloured gender politics among Hindus and Muslims

(Desai, 1994:7). There is considerable variation in the social construction of gender in different parts of India, especially between the northern and southern regions, but only general patterns of gender inequality will be focused on to highlight the development of women.

Gender Inequality in the Family

Research has increasingly documented the association between gender inequality within the family and unfavourable demographic outcomes such as early marriage, discrimination against daughters in access to food and health care, poor nutritional status of women, and their inability to seek health care for themselves. The fourth World Conference on Women held in Beijing in 1995 adopted the Platform For Action (PFA) recognising the girl child as a separate entity which calls for a review of all investment decisions in the area of women's development.

The family has been recognised as the primary site of the oppression of women. Various factors such as economic power and division of labour, restrictions on women's autonomy, marriage and kinship patterns, act as barriers to women's development. Family life drains women of their physical and mental energy. Early marriages act as stumbling blocks in the path of women's progress since they become home-bound due to child bearing. The emphasis on women's reproductive role almost to the exclusion of all else has dealt a death-blow to women in the Third World for whom frequent pregnancies are a way of life.

In Indian families, women's autonomy and physical mobility are restrained by various cultural traditions and practices. In this context, women's powerlessness is reinforced by behavioural norms which pose a lifelong disadvantage. The most prominent of these are seclusion, subservience and self-denial, which have important implications for women's control over their fate, including their reproductive choice.

Seclusion imposes a variety of restrictions on women: their spatial movement outside the home is restricted; total or partial veiling of the head and face is enforced; a strict code of behaviour governs any

interaction with men. The degree of seclusion varies with the social norms prevailing in the region and community and according to the economic status of the household. Social norms even dictate the dress codes for women which is a much simpler issue in women's autonomy when compared to issues such as choice of higher education, employment, marriage partner and the number of children. If women do not have freedom even in matters of dress, it seems quite meaningless to address higher issues of autonomy which require greater decision-making on the part of women.

The extent to which seclusion can be practised is often limited by poverty. Ironically, higher family income provides the opportunity to withdraw women from the labour force, limiting their freedom of movement and making them increasingly dependent on men. Many women give up their careers or stop seeking employment after marriage often under pressure from their husbands or their families.

It is predicted that in time, increasing westernization, urbanisation, modernisation and education can be expected to reduce parental ability to enforce women's exclusion. Though social norms are rooted in broader social institutions, their impact on the individual behaviour of men and women occurs within the domain of the family and immediate kinship network.

Gender, Health and Development

These make up a dynamic triad, as without basic health, the population cannot possess the physical and mental energy necessary for Development and health have crucial intrinsic interrelations. It has been demonstrated beyond doubt in the classic case of Kerala that without a certain level of social and economic development, providing basic health care is a difficult goal. Gender, health and development national development.

Food Security

In many Third World countries, including India, malnutrition is endemic among women and children, especially within poor households. The seasonal nature of agriculture brings special problems to women who are prone to neglect eating during peak work hours or at times when food supplies have dwindled (Ostergaard. 1992: 114-115). Many

cultural practices can also lead to malnutrition despite the opportunity provided for adequate food intake. In India, many women, mainly in traditional set ups, take their meals after serving the whole family and guests. This often results in shortage of prepared food which makes women go without it or manage with remains of the previous meals. It is a rare occasion for women to enjoy their food along with other family members.

At the national level, even when sufficient supplies of food are available, they often do not reach those who need it most. The Public Distribution System (PDS), which targets the less affluent sections of society, cannot satisfy the needs of the millions of daily-wage earners or casual labourers many of whom are women. Thus those who need it most do not have the means to buy it. Women are especially burdened under such conditions as they are held responsible for feeding their families and children.

Reproduction and Health

In the developing countries, including India, women's social status is largely determined by motherhood, which carries a high social value. This has led to high fertility conditions and linking of women's status and respect to the number of children she has. The social pressures to bear many children expose women to health damages and leaves them with no opportunity to participate in self-development activities. There is also the cultural preference to have a son which force women to give birth to a son through multiple pregnancies. The high infant mortality rate also increases the pressure on women to have more children.

At another extreme is infertility, which is a curse for women in India and is a prime factor in depriving women of social status and personal worth. Such women face rejection from their husbands, family and are also exposed to divorce or desertion. This is also true for women who bear only daughters. The low status of women permits people to assume that it is always the woman who is infertile and responsible for determining the sex of the child.

The high fertility of women also lead to some 500,000 maternal deaths each year, primarily in the developing world among poor women in remote villages. It is estimated that 82 per cent of the maternal deaths in rural India occur either at home or on the way to the hospital (WHO, 1986). Lack of trained birth attendants, unhygienic conditions during deliveries, spontaneous abortions, stillbirths and poor nutritional status all increase maternal morbidity. It is found that pregnancy wastage due to abortions and stillbirths was around 30 per cent among Indian women of lower socio-economic strata subsisting on diets providing less than 1,850 kcal and 44 grams of protein per day (Mitra, 1985). There are also estimates which reveal that roughly five million abortions are performed annually in India, of which about 4.5 million are illegal (Khan, 1993). As a result, abortion related mortality and morbidity continues to be high and at least 10 per cent of all maternal deaths result from abortion. Women are also vulnerable to sexually transmitted diseases, HIV, AIDS and other infections which are proving to be high risk health hazards.

The India Family Planning Programme renamed as the Family Welfare Programme concentrates mainly on women as clients despite the fact that women are not the decision makers in most families. Male sterilizations account for only 8 per cent of all sterilizations in 1989-90. The disproportionate emphasis on female sterilization reflects a lack of concern for women's health.

Environment and Sanitation

The violation of bio-diversity and the consistent application of reductionist science by the predominantly male scientific community has precipitated an ecological crisis affecting the lives of millions of women over the world. Barring a few zones, the entire country is reeling under an acute water crisis due to extensive commercial exploitation of forests, overexploitation of ground water for commercial agriculture and inappropriate afforestation. The mass plantation of eucalyptus for 'greening' has destroyed nature's water conservation mechanism by depleting ground water and inhibiting the growth of other plants.

Since women are the water providers, the disappearance of water sources present consequential burdens and drudgery. Longer walks for procuring water and increasing time spent on it have direct effects on their health and opportunities for other fruitful activity. Although women are the main providers and users of water, they are rarely consulted in the initiation of water projects. Hardly any effort is made to conserve or replenish water sources by appropriate technology by the scientific community as the provision of water household purposes is the burden borne by women and therefore regarded as an undervalued issue.

Leisure is a rare pleasure in the lives of a large majority of women in India. Studies of women's time-use in the hills of Uttar Pradesh, where forest reserves are depleted, show that women spend nearly five hours per day collecting wood for household fuel (Swaminathan, 1984). Significant declines in the availability of water and fuel, said to be due to population pressure, are largely consequences of faulty development strategies which overburden women who are responsible for fetching water and collecting firewood. They have to spend precious time and energy in travelling long distances in search of both these vital necessities.

The daily and direct contact with water particularly of poor quality due to increasing pollution exposes women to the risk of waterborne diseases. Shortage of water leads to poor sanitation, especially among women, who are in the reproductive age group and are menstruating. Lack of toilet facilities also increases the chances of infections and related diseases. This problem is acute in India, as women even in many urban centres do not have easy access to sanitary facilities. The type of housing and space available is also crucial in determining women's health. Small houses with hardly any ventilation and lack of privacy to manage personal sanitation can also increase the morbidity conditions of women who are homebound.

Education

Education is intrinsic to development and an important instrument of empowering people with basic cognitive skills and making them self-reliant. This had been recognised in the Constitution of India which upholds the basic right of equal opportunity for education irrespective of sex. But the rates of female literacy and school enrolment and attendance are much lower than those for men. The high son-preference in India has led parents to neglect the education of their daughters and invest in the education of their sons who are seen as a source of support in their old age. It is assumed that girls who are married off require no formal education for household tasks and reproductive activity. Thus illiteracy renders them dependent and vulnerable even to minor stresses as they are ill-equipped to face the challenges and contingencies of life.

Although literacy rates among women continue to be lower than those for men, 39 percent versus 64 percent respectively, the overall female literacy rate has improved from 47 percent of the male rate in 1971 to 62 per cent in 1991. Despite some improvements, female literacy and enrolment remain low in the northern states of Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh which have a female literacy rate of about 25 percent in 1991 when compared to an average of 48 percent in other major states.

Of late, there is a growing demand among educated men for educated brides which has been an incentive for parents to educate their daughters. Even so, many women who are graduates or post-graduates are ill-treated, persecuted, and driven to suicide or murdered by their husbands and in-laws for not meeting dowry demands. Thus education has failed to enhance the social value of women. Women are often ignorant of their rights and in many cases even when they are knowledgeable, are helpless to exercise their rights as autonomous individuals. Education has not motivated women to build their personal identity or to sharpen their awareness of legal and political rights in order to become self-reliant, economically secure and autonomous individuals.

Literacy, thus, does not necessarily bring about emancipation of women. Most obstacles to equality exist in people's minds, in the form of prejudices, traditional beliefs and cultural stereotypes (particularly the roles presented to girls in early life) which discourage women from making full use of their intellectual potential. As a consequence, the percentage of women declines at each rung of the academic ladder.

Education is regarded as an important catalyst, nevertheless, in women's development. Even a few years of primary education have been shown to lower women's wish to bear many children either directly or indirectly because of increased access to their own economic resources.

Employment

Contrary to the traditionally incorrect concept of men being the bread-winners, between 25 percent to 33 percent of the households in the world are headed by women. These families are usually the poorest of the poor since women's work is treated as marginal and their access to employment restricted. The UN report of the Mid Decade Conference in Copenhagen in 1980 states about women and the economy that as a group women have access to much fewer resources than men. They put in two thirds of the total number of working hours, they are registered as constituting one third of the total labour force and receive one-tenth of the total remuneration. They own only one percent of the world's material goods and their rights to ownership is often far less than those of men. Women retain major responsibility for domestic chores irrespective of their labour force participation. When domestic work, home-based economic work, and labour outside the home are combined women work for longer hours than men, particularly in poor households.

The bulk of the population in India depends on agriculture for survival. It provides some form of employment or livelihood to 70 per cent of India's workforce. For women, agriculture is a particularly important source of employment, around 80 per cent of women who are recognised as economically active are found in agriculture. The growth

of capitalist agriculture causes the displacement of small cultivators (Mies, 1980). This leads displaced women to be marginalised in the labour market as men are better placed than women to migrate for work.

The growth of the industrial sector in urban centres has led to the movement of men to non farm employment which is more productive. Women consequently have taken over agricultural tasks as men migrate and their participation in the agricultural sector has been increasing. Rural poverty, illiteracy and family responsibilities all prevent women from seeking better and more remunerative employment. Thus women stagnate in the traditional economic sector as men advance into the modern sector. A vast majority of the women in India work on family farms as unpaid workers. The National Sample Survey of 1987-88 has shown that women account for over 50 per cent of unpaid family workers. Most of the land they farm is either owned or rented by men. Thus their lack of land ownership tends to decrease the importance of their economic contribution.

The informal sector, which is often perceived as a necessary evil in a country's economic development, is assumed as diminishing in importance with economic advancement. Women are concentrated in this sector due to their lower skill levels and are therefore less likely to find jobs in the formal sector. Self-employment in rural and urban informal sectors forms an important source of employment for Indian women. A variety of activities such as making *bidis* and pickles, making handicrafts such as lace, vending vegetables, domestic works and factory piece - rate work fall in this category (National Commission on Self-employed Women, 1988). In this large and heterogeneous sector, very few government regulations protect workers and those that exist are rarely enforced.

The government's regulatory policy towards small-scale enterprises is based on the assumption that they are run by self-employed workers and concessions given to these enterprises will benefit only informal sector workers. In reality, many large industries contract and employ a sizeable workforce of casual workers who remain in the informal sector. Since women constitute a good number

of them they are denied the benefits accorded to regular employees in these industries (Meis, 1982; Baud, 1992). Thus economic reforms in India and liberalisation may adversely affect women's employment.

Since women are bound to the traditional sectors due to lower skill, men gain priority in training for new and advanced skills needed in the modern sector. Even if women manage to enter the formal labour market, they are exploited in diverse ways, mainly, through labour market segmentation resulting in limited and low paying employment opportunities for women and lower wages compared to men in the same occupation, despite the equal remuneration act (Desai, 1994:27). Women in the modern service sector tend to be heavily concentrated in occupations that run parallel to traditional household tasks such as nursery, primary and middle school teachers, nurses, social and welfare workers, clerks and secretaries. All these jobs are accorded a low status due to the concentration of women in them. Women are rarely found occupying positions in higher education, administration, research or advanced training institutions.

The corporate world is often biased in employing women in high paying jobs and those that require independent action. Women are seen as unstable as they may discontinue their jobs with marriage and family responsibilities. They are rarely considered for corporate management jobs as their occupation is only regarded as something to fall back upon and a supplementary source of income for a family. They are not seen as in need of a career, but only a job. Labour laws which mandate that women should not be given night shifts and must be granted maternity leave are also convenient ways of screening out potential women workers by employers.

Women's increased participation in income earning activities, thereby reducing their economic dependence on men has been perceived as bringing about greater freedom and equality in the personal life and status of women. But this advantage is lost if women have no control over income earned. The incomes of most women are seen as family income, which is taken and controlled by their husbands or other male members in the family. For instance a study of 20 villages in Kerala and Tamil Nadu reports that, on an average women

contributed 98 per cent of their earnings towards family maintenance while men contributed only 78 per cent, keeping substantial amounts for personal use (Mencher, 1988). Similar patterns are observed in the rest of India.

Politics

Family background and environment are significant influences which encourage women's participation in public life. In traditional societies such as India, women are barred by current social and cultural conditions from safely stepping out of the confines of the four walls of their homes. The entry to public life and politics is usually through their fathers and husbands. The concept of public life is not limited to political participation but entails a gamut of community activities and leadership of development programmes which will broaden their outlook and give them a better understanding of current events.

Women may be inhibited externally or internally from taking part in politics. They may be externally restrained from political activity by formal or informal rules barring them from channels of political access or from political organizations. Social norms against female participation may be accepted by women. In such case, the inhibition derives from self-restraint (Verba et al., 1978: 254).

The state of Karnataka in south India led the way in 1987, bringing about sweeping changes in the programme of self government (*Panchayat raj*) reserving 25 percent of the seats in *panchayat* bodies at the village, sub-district and district levels for women. This is an essential step in enabling the voice of women to be heard in the ordering of affairs at the grassroots level. But the role of women in the political life of India is still marginal. In the 545 member legislative assembly, the Lok Sabha, only 39 seats are currently held by women. The bill to extend reservation to women in Parliament and State assemblies up to 33.3 percent is a historic affirmative action, the largest reservation in place now being 30 percent in Argentina.

Many political parties use women to give a boost to their party image and if women succeed to get elected they are given insignificant

portfolios, rarely ones that are powerful and prestigious. Pakistan and Bangladesh are classic cases of having the experience of women headed governments in the Third World which are plagued by very low political participation of women. The high visibility of women occupying powerful positions very often hide the distress of the vast mass of submerged women who constitute their electorates.

Violence and Lack of Legal Protection

Violence against women and girls is the most pervasive violation of human rights in the world today. They are subjected to assault, rape, sexual slavery, arbitrary imprisonment, torture, verbal abuse, mutilation and even murder. Roughly 60 million women who should be alive today are missing because of gender discrimination, predominantly in South and West Asia, China and North Africa (Bunch, 1997:41).

Female infanticide practised in some parts of India, including Tamil Nadu, have been associated with extravagant expenses in a series of customs of rites de passage of girls and financial burden of their marriage and son preference. In Usilampatti of Tamil Nadu hospital statistics reveal that nearly 600 female births in the Kallar community have been recorded every year during the 1980s. Among them more than 450 became victims of female infanticide (Venkataramani, 1986). To support the above finding it may be seen from 1981 and 1991 censuses that the sex ratio is exceptionally adverse to females in Madurai and Salem districts of Tamil Nadu. According to the 1991 census the sex ratio in Salem is 830 which is one of the least in all districts of India.

In countries where people have adequate health care and food, 105 boys are born on an average for every 100 girls, but fewer male babies survive the first year of life, reflecting the female's inherent biological advantage. But in many Asian nations the sex ratio drops dramatically. The sex ratio in India in 1991 stands at 929 females per 1000 males.

For millions of women today the home is a locus of terror. In India, more than 5,000 women are killed each year because their in-laws consider their dowries inadequate. Very few of their murderers

are brought to justice. Battering at home constitutes by far the most universal form of violence against women and is a significant cause of injury. A World Bank analysis of 35 recent studies from industrialized and developing countries shows that one quarter to one half of all women have suffered physical abuse by an intimate partner (Bunch 1997 : 42). In India, violent practices against women are often recognised and defended as strands of the cultural weave as in the case of wife-beating. During political confrontation and wars in the form of ethnic and religious strife women increasingly face rape and forced pregnancy. In recent years, mass rape has been reported as a weapon of war in Cambodia, Liberia, Peru, Somalia, Uganda and Indonesia.

Although the Indian Constitution grants equal rights and opportunities, the legal system has failed to deliver justice to women in cases of divorce, maintenance, custody and inheritance. The existence of a parallel system of personal laws further discriminate against women rendering them helpless. In principle women are guaranteed the basic right to property, but in practice the parallel regime of personal laws limit women's inheritance, custody and maintenance rights. In most cases, once divorced, women forfeit their rights to the house and other property accumulated during marriage. In effect their contribution to family maintenance and assets go unrecognised and unrewarded. In most countries, domestic abuse of women is regarded as a private family matter. While sexual and physical assaults are broadly accepted as crimes outside the home, the law in most countries is mute when it comes to attacks within the family. Further very few women have the resources or knowledge to seek legal protection or justice.

Feminist Policy Perspectives for Development

A common feature of most existing models of development is their narrow conceptualisation and excessive importance accorded to economic change. Feminist perspectives in policy and action for development are oriented to initiate and change the depressing conditions of women. Women's empowerment is a multi - dimensional concept which includes greater access to knowledge and resources, greater autonomy in decision making, greater ability to plan their lives and freedom from the shackles of oppressive tradition and customs.

The United Nations Development Programme in its study of 130 countries ranks India at 99 for empowerment of women in the Human Development Report (1995). The agenda for policy action visualises certain steps to achieve empowerment of women.

1. Setting a firm time-table to end legal discrimination and establishing a framework for promoting legal equality;
2. Taking concrete action to restructure social and institutional norms;
3. Fixing certain threshold targets to gain gender equality;
4. Implementing key programmes for universal formal education;
5. Improved reproductive health and status of women; and
6. Mobilising national and international efforts to target people, especially women, to participate in development.

Apart from government initiatives to achieve the objective of women's empowerment, various women's groups and organisations have started to take an active interest in ongoing development programmes.

Gender equality within the family can be taken as a turning point for empowerment of women in society. Parents must be encouraged to treat girl children as equal to sons. The mass media can play an important role by presenting successful women models in various areas for emulation by the younger generation of women. Society should be conscientized that most divisions of labour, rights and obligations linked to sex are socially determined and therefore changeable. Women must also involve their children in various tasks at home to break the strict limits regarding the duties to be performed by members of each sex. While sons should be encouraged to assist in the kitchen and learn cooking, daughters should acquire the skills of carrying out minor repairs, to start with.

In the context of gender and health, feminist action has concentrated on lessening the costs of reproduction, especially career costs. Women must not be penalised for pregnancy or parenthood, and men, through domestic and child care duties, are to make an investment in reproduction that equals the investment made by women. The demographic transition in Tamil Nadu is a unique case where welfare policies have helped largely illiterate and poor women to accept the small family norm (Mahadevan and Sumangala, 1997). Family planning services must be aimed at men as well as women. Primary health care should be given greater priority in all welfare programmes.

Women have started paying attention to environment and sanitation which affect their lives to a greater extent. The agitation against the Narmada dam in Gujarat by renowned activist, Medha Patkar, has emerged from the concern of peoples especially women, about the deteriorating effect of such large water projects on their lives. Women are traditionally responsible for managing water resources in and around the home. Women have the incentive to make water programmes work, since they are the most affected by poor access to water. Wherever communities are involved in the design, construction, installation and maintenance of water supplies, water projects are more efficient, cost effective and hence sustainable (Mies, 1981).

Education is recognised as the single largest factor affecting development. Relevant and quality education prepares people to participate in and to decide various issues of development. The single most influential factor in birth rate is education. Greater efforts should be made to provide education to girls which will lower the wish to bear many children either directly by increasing their awareness of contraception or indirectly through increased access through their own economic resources. The present BJP government in India has decided to make education free for girls up to graduation as a policy measure for women's empowerment.

The implications of exclusion of the arduous and wide ranging contribution of women as unproductive work are serious for women on the economic spectrum. At the personal level, this lowers the status of women in the family and community life. At the national level, there is

a gross misrepresentation of income, investment and development projection. Women's work should be reflected realistically in national censuses and surveys by conducting micro-studies. Any strategy for improving women's access to paid employment must also simultaneously reduce the burden of domestic work. Many development projects in India fail they disregard this fact and impose heavier burdens on the lives of people. A conscious effort must also be made to move women into more remunerative and decisive positions to avoid their stagnation at low and less remunerative jobs. Entrepreneurship programmes could generate self employment of women.

The presence of women at policy and decision making levels is important for restructuring social and institutional norms. The constitutional amendment which provides for reservation of 33 percent of seats for women in systems of local self - government with one-third of the chairpersons also being women will usher in new patterns of leadership breaking the traditional leadership mould determined by sex, caste, class and wealth. Women are now increasingly participating in decisions that affect their lives from the village and grassroots level to district and state levels. The bill to extend similar reservation to women in Parliament, if accepted, will be an incentive to women's empowerment.

Family violence affects the healthy development and productivity of all societies. Women are now widely accepted as the cornerstone of sustainable development, protecting their rights and raising their status is essential in all endeavours ranging from education, politics, family planning and employment. In all societies, poverty, discrimination, ignorance and social unrest are common predictors of violence against women (Bunch, 1997:43).

The 1990s have been a decade of unprecedented achievement in women's human rights. The global campaign organized and led by women culminated in the Global Tribunal on Violations of Women's Human Rights in Vienna. As a response to the momentum generated

in Vienna, the United Nations General Assembly adopted the Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women, considered a formal elaboration of CEDAW. Another milestone was the 1994 appointment of a UN Special Reporter on Violence against Women. Many countries have enacted legislations against domestic violence, marital rape and sexual harassment. India has enacted a law against sexual harassment in the work place but ignores domestic violence and marital rape. Such laws can be positive steps as deterrents to gender based violence but their successful implementation is necessary to stem the violent tide against women.

In the context of public policy formation and provision of public service to promote gender equality, it is important to note that such positive measures will mediate the effects of other policies of development in a favourable direction at the national level. India has the credit of having produced excellent women in almost all walks of life from ancient times. The future of the feminist movement depends not only on women but also on men who must be gender-sensitised and in all broad mindedness realize the evil of these inequalities, and help to eradicate the deeply ingrained discrimination against women that has characterised human history (Nair, 1995 : 772).

The women's movement is not without criticism. The impediments to an international feminism are the differences between women. Colonialism, slavery, racism and imperialism have created hierarchies of oppression in which some women benefit from the oppression of others. Women of the Third World accuse Western feminism of ignorance of their problems. Western feminist movements must gain knowledge of the positions and needs of other women to remove eurocentrism and racism from their movement, to strengthen and enrich international feminism, and give women more models of action

(Bulbeck 1988: 148-153). It must nevertheless be understood that radical feminism is regarded as a luxury by Third World women who consider liberal feminism as the goal at present. In conclusion, to quote eminent jurist Justice V.R. Krishna Iyer:

Inequality of gender is passe and the world belongs to women as equals... with each passing day gender crime is escalating and the human rights flag must fly half-mast in humiliation until total deliverance of womankind from this unkind turpitude is reached (Iyer, 1994).

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