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Women and Development : Gender Concerns

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OCCASIONAL PAPER — 1985

No. 2



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GENDER CONCERNS IN DEVELOPMENT DEBATE:
EMERGING PERSPECTIVES

I

Women and Development:
The Evolving Journey

During the last decade the 'women and development' debate has incontestably advanced the frontiers of our knowledge, accumulating evidence no matter what the growth models, that development increases differentiations by class and gender. In the mid-eighties the 'word' has acquired a familiarity, a visibility and a legitimacy among researchers and development specialists. The 'global consensus' in the mid-seventies that women have a vital role to play in the promotion of Equality, Development and Peace, gave a new direction and dimension to reframing gender issues vis-a-vis the process of development and change. At the beginning of the decade the notion of women's integration in the process of development, howsoever limited in its conception, became instrumental for policy debates, research initiative and organisational efforts by decoding development messages (policy, technical and ideological aspects) from women's perspective. The global debate on Women's Equality, Development and Peace has introduced totally new dimension giving to the debate a political international and developmental character in

place of earlier approaches which viewed issues of women's status as essentially a social and cultural phenomenon.¹

The 'women in development' debate has been enormously enriched by the fresh intellectual and ideological offensive taken by women in developing countries, reevaluating and reinterpreting their own experiences. The new information base highlighting the complexity of women's question, established linkages between the marginalisation and subordination of women to structures - social, political, economic and ideological, and is exploring new challenges emerging from conservative forces joining hands with revivalist tendencies and authoritarian structures within the country and new forms of exploitation emanating from world economic systems. This has provided the most compulsive logic for the reassessment of development theories, concepts and approaches. While recognising the fact that it is difficult to arrive at a common set of priority issues for the whole region due to diversity of points of departure and historical context of development of the countries in the Asia and the Pacific region, 'women and development' studies which began exploring the realities of women's lives through hosts of micro-studies, found many areas of common concern.

The growth of indigenous scholarship during the Decade, slowly building on primary data based microstudies - both problem/policy oriented and analytical - has not only

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1. Draft Final Report of the Ministerial Conference of Non-aligned and other Developing Countries on the 'Role of Women in Development' Delhi, April 1985.

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provided gender based analysis of employment, educational, demographic and health aspects of women's status, but has also provided material for challenging and macro-perspectives based on aggregative data sets which hide more than what they reveal. The cumulative evidence of what may be broadly termed as 'impact-studies', revealed that the negative effects of the process of agricultural modernisation and rural development, industrialisation and other sectoral policies on women's role were manifestations of process of development which was inimical to the poor and the marginalised groups of which women formed a substantial part. A significant number of these studies focussing on 'less visible women' (both statistically and within established scholarship) concluded that prevailing models of development have been detrimental to women in poorer households, not only denying them recognition as 'producers' but also contributing to their marginalisation due to the unequal access to employment, credit, technology, education and training.

Some of the key issues in this debate have been beautifully summed up by a feminist scholar who feels, that women are increasingly getting involved with 'the politics of knowledge' by using innovative techniques of data collection, research and project development, extracting and sharing authentic human experiences. "Women in the citadels of academia are daily assulting the scared cows of learning. They are questioning the historians who have reconstructed a past devoid of women or the economist with their myopic view of labour and whose theory of growth proclaiming the magic of the market place has so disastrously deluded so much of the Third World".²

2. Lucille M. Mair - International Women's Decade: A Balance Sheet: Centre for Women's Development Studies, New Delhi - 1985.

One feels different in summarising research trends and issues for the region as a whole as the diversity and volume of literature available on women has grown considerably during the last decade. Some attempts have already been undertaken at the regional and national level to compile and synthesise the research information, although the growth of research activity in the Asian and Pacific region has been uneven and scattered.³ A bulk of research on women is project specific and micro-level analysis, mostly available in mimeograph form. A significant deficiency of most of the research is its inadequate conceptualisation and contextualisation. To understand the present day realities of women's lives better, one has to look back into history (pre-colonial, colonial and post independence phase) and analyse the forces/structures that have drawn women out or pushed back.

A review of the 'state of the art' in Asian region suggests, that "studies on women in Asia, signify an old concern with a new focus moving away from historical, prescriptive and ideal-typical accounts based on scriptural analysis, to more

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3. a. Leela Dube - Status Report on the Studies of Women in South East Asia (5 countries of the ASEAN)
 - b. Women's Studies and Social Sciences in Asia - Regional Meeting of Experts - UNESCO, Bangkok-1983 (Participating countries - India, Malaysia, Philippines, Republic of Korea and Thailand).
 - c. Bina Agarwal - Women's Studies in Asia and the Pacific - APDC, Kuala Lumpur, 1983.
 - d. The Identification of Priority Research Issues on Women in Asia and the Pacific - A report, APDC/SAREC, Kuala Lumpur - 1984. (16 countries participated).
 - e. Status papers prepared by different countries for these Conferences.

problem-specific and action/policy relevant research". As a part of the indigenisation process, questions are being raised as regards the basic assumptions and borrowed concepts and methodological frameworks governing research and the need is felt for critical examination of existing theories and techniques . A group of researchers from the Asian region reviewing the initiatives taken in their countries in promoting research and teaching as women, suggested ways for utilising research for 'policy and for faculty development' in order to develop social science research in a way which could promote greater regional co-operation and understanding of inter-cultural issues on women and to examine conceptual framework and evolve relevant research methodologies. A country report further stated that "women's studies do not mean merely focussing on women's experience, problems, needs, etc. but has to be viewed as a critical instrument to improve our knowledge about society which at present remains partial and biased projecting view of social reality derived from a male perspective".⁴

Another regional level conference with scholars drawn from fifteen countries, reviewed research on women's issue in this region and drew up an agenda of research priorities for the next decade. Despite variations in national situations, a number of areas of common concern emerged from this exercise i.e. women and poverty, impact of technological change on women's work and income, effects of migration both national and international (latter may be more relevant to some countries) on women, female headed households, women in

4. Women's Studies and Social Sciences in Asia, op.cit.

the informal sector, impact of industrialisation strategies (particularly export-oriented) women, women in the family, women's struggles and organisations, the effect of state planning and policies on women, impact of changes in world economic system on women's employment, income and well being and theoretical studies on women's question.⁵

The group also identified problem areas in the utilisation and generation of research, problem of dissemination, absence of and need of cross-cultural research and collaborative networking arrangements and need for training the younger researchers on women's issues.

The Asian Regional seminar in Delhi identified the following problems areas regarding growth of women's studies in the region:-

1. the research process has yet to take shape of an intellectual movement incorporating historical and structural perspectives. Greater efforts need to be put in to developing theoretical and methodological perspective for research on women.
2. lack of appreciation for applied and problem oriented research.
3. lack of recognition and positive support from the academia and the government.
4. lack of effective network of women researchers to exchange experience and expertise and to expand resources.

Despite these obstacles and gaps in data and quality of research, during the last decade some trends in research on women, are visible:

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5. APDC/SAREC Conference op.cit.

1. Creation of infrastructure needed to promote women's studies, independent women's studies centres/institutions, (e.g. Republic of Korea, India, Bangladesh), special cells or units within universities and research centres (Korea, Malaysia, India, Sri Lanka) units within the government or separate ministries to handle women's affairs (in most of the countries) National Commission (Philippines). These regional and national forums have provided an opportunity to researchers to review the research trends and identify priorities.
2. Attempts to organise professional associations network at national and regional level (PAWF, AWRAN, IAWS in India and Women and Development Network of Australia).
3. Attempts to prepare status papers and compile bibliographies of research on women and exchange information, however, the gap between research output and its publication remains wide thus limiting its use by scholars within the region.
4. Indigenisation of research on women although it is difficult to make a correct assessment of the volume of such research as very little effort has been made to consolidate and systematise this research.
5. Few studies which provide a cross-cultural comparative perspective underlying structural changes in sex-roles and social organization of households in response to economic and political changes.

A UNESCO report while questioning the tendency of universalising women's issues and problems, emphasises that "with sound cross-cultural evidence including in-depth studies that have not so far received scientific attention, the validity of many of these generalisations may be disproved... Studies on women and action programmes aimed at elevating women's status have been handicapped by a general lack of understanding of a cross-cultural and intra-cultural variations in the organising principles of societies and in the life contexts of women.⁶

II

With these review exercises already undertaken at the national and regional level, it is possible to identify some broad contours of research on women and where the major focus has been. The social science literature on 'women and development', issues has been sector-specific (women and agricultural development and modernization, industrialisation, technology, educational development, law, demographic trends, etc.) area-specific, group-specific or issue specific (women and migration, female headed households, violence against women, sex tourism, kinship and family patterns, women in export oriented industries, women in home-based production).

6. Leela Dube - op.cit.

Although the term 'development' has defined all attempts to an acceptable definition, as a process it encompasses social, economic, political, legal and even ideological spheres. Its contextual nature necessitates an inter-disciplinary and multi-disciplinary approach to issues and problems and that these should be related to wider developmental context.

Since '75 such reviews of development concepts, approaches, policies and programmes have formed the basis for drawing research agenda, action plans and priorities. A few major arguments which have developed from the research are summed up. They are not exhaustive but illustrative.

National development policies and plans have by and large neglected gender dimension in development theory and practice, in policy planning and resource allocation and there is a need for increasing women's participation in the development process by improving their access to resources, developmental inputs and services and integrating their needs in the national development efforts. Some scholars concerned with issues relating to 'women and poverty', unemployment, under-employment and skewed distribution of productive assets, income, resources and power between men and women, have tried to seek explanations to these issues within the national developmental context.

Women's economic roles have remained the most critical area for research, analysis and data collection. Most scholars have argued that the statistical undervaluation and ideological devaluation (women as supplementary/secondary workers) of women's work roles by and large, has been

responsible for under conceptualisation and non-articulation of women's concern in development thinking, policies and programmes. Research has destroyed many myths by focussing on the content and quantum of women's work in the non-monetised sectors and women's critical role in survival strategies of poorer households. Estimates suggest that of all the hours worked throughout the world, women contribute about two-thirds, that rural women grow at least 50% of world's food, produce most of the food for domestic consumption and process, prepare and serve to families. In addition, in some developing regions a quarter to half of rural households are permanently or defacto headed by women. Inadequate recognition and 'invisibility' of women's labour to data system, is reflected in neglect of women's claim to policy and resource support. The causes of this mystification and the methods of imputing area of debate. Time-use studies of rural households have attempted alternative ways of conceptualising and collecting data on women's work.

This submerged economy (hidden from view) of 'invisible rural women', is now threatened by policies of agrarian reforms and rural development, transfer of technology, commercialisation of agriculture and privatisation of land, eroding women's customary right to land. Such processes have taken the form of a gender differentiation in which men dominate in the management and decision-making of commercial and large scale agriculture, while women continue to be in the subsistence production with low technology and low returns.⁷ With more and more area being converted into cash crops

7. Sarthy Acharya - Women and Rural Development in the Third World - Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Bombay, 1984.

for export and domestic consumption and decline in the areas under food crop, women's productivity in agriculture has declined, reducing their access to food and affecting the nutritional level of the household. The food technologies (in agriculture, dairy development, fisheries, food processing etc.) the major areas absorbing women's labour, have increasingly marginalised their roles.

Forest development policies often mean protecting commercial interests of industries at the expense of pressing basic needs of poorer households and particularly women who rely on forests for fuel, fodder and food. Women's experience in industries is none too happy. Most subsistence crafts involving women are losing ground with the fast deterioration of environment and growing scarcity of local material like wood, cane, grass or needs hastening the death knell of local crafts. In other cases traditional skills have been increasingly absorbed in commercial economy and a change in organisation of production and marketing leaving women helpless and ignorant.⁸

In the modern industrial sector, expansion of export-oriented foot-loose industries although have provided increasing employment to women, but the nature of such industries with uncertain markets, stiff competition in the world market, makes it less likely for them to have any long-term commitment. Such industries are forced to rely on cheap labour. Women work with inadequate protection of labour laws and trade unions. The newer industries (electronics, garment, food processing etc.) linked to the

8. Nirmala Banerjee - Women and Industrialisation in Developing countries (Mimeo), Centre for the Study of Social Sciences, Calcutta, 1984.

world system of production have created new forms of women's exploitation. Studies on Export Processing Zones and Free Trade Zones in various countries of South East and South Asia, have explored the relationship between the international system of production, social-political structures and the household politics. Studies have found that in the Free Trade Zones working hours are longer and labour laws are restrictive in order to curb the possibility of collective bargaining. Any attempt at unionising are severely dealt with sometimes even manipulating the traditional authority of the family or of local bodies.

Another significant feature of women's employment is that they are predominantly in the informal sector economy, trying to meet the challenges of poverty and survival. Growing number of these women who are engaged in home-based production, under putting out system are not even aware that they are integral to national and international manufacturing industries without their taking any responsibility for their health, working conditions and minimum wages. Even where they are part of the factory production, they are concentrated in few industries and in typically women's jobs, which makes them more vulnerable to onslaughts of vagaries of markets and technological obsolescence.⁹

The question arises why these sovereign nations permit these runaway shops and other commercial interests to move in the country without adequate controls and protection to

9. In the electronic industry women suffer from eye complaints, burnes suspected cancer risks from the chemical solvent used. Multinationals companies have already used up and discarded as many as 6 million women in developing countries who are too ill, too old (at 30) and too exhausted to be of any use to anybody quoted in Nirmala Banerjee.

workers? Is it not that vested interests always find allies within dominant groups and power elites? The implications of these growth models for female labour force, need a more rigorous analysis and an inter-country comparison.

Women who rejected growth strategies and compartmentalisation of their development needs to few sectors (soft), soon realised the international linkages to patterns of growth and development in Third World Countries. During the Second Development Decade, the growth strategies were already under attack and the need to reorder the inequitous international economic system was on the agenda. The hope lingered in the minds of developing countries, unlike the mood in the eighties, that solution to some of the problems of dependent development, can be found through fresh international negotiations and initiatives. The current stalemate in this process belies the hope generated in the seventies.

The view that has now crystallised is that the very nature of the development process and its philosophy needs to be seriously questioned (the alternative development debate) if it is not to marginalise women. Scholars concerned with distributive aspects of development in a class and gender matrix, have found increasing evidence of the worsening situation of women.

Trade, technology and finance which have enhanced the domination of developed countries over developing countries, markets, labour and technology have accentuated gender differentiations and class contradictions within the society. The development crisis in the Third World due to disastrous

impact of global recession, mounting debt burden and growing trade deficits, increasing bilateralism and cut backs in developmental aid, is forcing developing countries to rely more on ternal resource mobilisation and export-oriented strategies. Escalation in arms race growing ethnic, class, caste tensions, and mounting defence expenditures are threatening the very basis of human development.

The important issue is, to what use this knowledge has been put to by women? What are women doing to mobilize themselves around some of these issues? An interesting literature has developed evaluating women's organisational efforts and an attempt to understand the socio-cultural and political context of these movements.

On the action front 'women and development' projects have in the last decade proliferated, with donor agencies and national agencies offering ideas for programming and action. Such women-specific projects have generated their own ethos, through they have sensitised the policy planner and women's groups of the advantages and limitations of such development projects in a given context. Their influence on policies and budgetary decisions in most cases has been nominal. An Afro-Asian workshop raising the issue of long-term continuity of such projects and its multiplier effects particularly in cases started by outside intervention, pointed out that the problems inherent in the project approach are evident in the dependency syndrome it creates. It suggests that women's projects or special structures should not substitute the comprehensive development approach, which could not be incorporated through the national policy.¹⁰

10. Report of an Afro-Asian Inter-regional workshop on "Strategies for improving Employment Conditions of Rural Women", Arusha, Tanzania, 1983.

ILO's documentation of some successful initiatives for improving the employment conditions of rural women shows both success as well as failure of these grassroots initiatives. These case studies also show, within the general processes of change, some constructive elements, signs of encouragement, on which one can build. Some general lessons also emerge, that while taking into account the overall context, constrained national economics, inequalities in societies and deep-seated barriers to greater power and influence of women-access to credit, assets (particularly land) and markets are important. But an organisational base is at the heart of success and sustainability and is most effective when of people's own choosing, to pursue goals they set for themselves. Supportive structures (government and academia) are also important.¹¹

The corporate body of knowledge termed as women's studies, to me it seems to provide a balance between the norms of scholarly research and women's consciousness about their oppression, inequities and injustices. The combination of the two may offer the best alternative to initiate a change through analysis action and reinterpretation of specific experiences of women that these are not natural occurrences but noted in the societal structures.

11. Arusha Report - Ibid

III

A complex set of issues surround the debate on 'women and development' although 'women, work and development' remains the single largest area of research. The bulk of research remains descriptive, which provides empirical evidence of changing situation of women in the contemporary context but has failed to develop by and large a coherent theoretical framework. A significant lacunae in many of these micro-studies is that they are not linked to the macro context. There is also a dearth of cross-cultural comparative studies on certain important issues, which can provide theoretical insights as well. Finally for a better understanding of the dialectic of sex, the nature and causes of women's subordination and its various forms and manifestations, it will be important to place the whole issue in a historical context.

Apart from the gaps in data systems which do not provide systematic gender-specific data on all aspects of women's development, there are several major issues that have emerged as a result of research done in this region, which need more rigorous analysis. The research priorities may vary from one country to another in the region however, a number of areas and topics seem to be important.

(i) Issues of State, Public Policy and Women: In multiple ways state is extending its areas of influence and it is necessary to assess the implications of state policy for women:

- a. Growth models/strategies (export-oriented, industrialisation) its implications for female labour force;
- b. population policies - new thrusts in population policies (selective strategies)
- c. legal system - with special reference to personal laws in property laws, erosion of customary rights of women;
- d. state, media education and culture including development communication its messages, media manipulation
- e. technology choices and transfer of technology - why it has a differential impact on women;
- f. migration and state policies affect on rural/urban family.

(ii) Need for more rigorous analysis and inter-country comparison of the issue of (a) Women's home-based production and its increasing integration into modern commercial interests both domestic and export sector (b) What are the policy options for their protection (c) What is the nature of interaction between gender, productive forces and division of labour by sex. What is the relationship between the power structure within the family and market factors in pushing women into low-paid sector of economy.

(iii) Women, family, kinship patterns and production system as family provides the immediate context. (a) Survival strategies of power households, women, poverty and female headed households, (b) Changes in family and kinship systems and traditional support systems.

(iv) Women in struggles national liberation movements, peasant and workers movements, cultural movements against hierarchical and authoritarian structures, movements for women's rights - with specific emphasis on ideology, organisational structure, strategies of mobilisation, leadership, issues taken up and response/reaction from power structures at different levels. Who were the women who participated and resisted.

(v) Women and violence in the present day context of growing ethnics, class, caste tensions. Areas which need to be explored are (a) family violence, public violence, state violence (b) Religio-cultural and political systems of and subordination of women, traditional grass and new forms of women's exploitation. (c) Violence its ideological and political dimension.

(vi) Issues emerging from women's grass roots experiences and role of such organisations in empowering women.

A major lacuna to the understanding of society is the ~~eh~~historical approach. A belief in the universal subordination of women has continued to hamper efforts to take up systematic research of factors which eroded women's access to and control over resources, the nature of their participation and value of their work and how traditional areas of female power have changed historically.

The Centre for Women's Development Studies is a group of professionals striving to work for the realisation of women's equality and development in all spheres of social life. It visualises its main role as that of a catalyst, in assisting women to realise their full potential and exercise their active influence on society and its transformation. The goals of national policy which support fuller and equal participation of women in all aspects and spheres of national life and development can be promoted if the ideas and institutions that marginalise women's role and contribution in society are weakened or eliminated.

The main objective of the Centre, therefore, is to help in the promotion, development, and dissemination of knowledge regarding evolution of women's roles in society and trends in social and economic organisation which impinge on their lives and status, with a view to :

- i. enhancing women's effective participation in the development process;
- ii. assisting in the framing and implementation of measures for realising women's equality; and
- iii. changing social attitudes regarding women.