

# **Women Work & Health: Mainstreaming Gender Perspectives in the Development Process—Understanding the past to delineate the future**

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## **Introduction**

This paper will review the historical perspective of women's work and development from its early stages where women merely featured as an ad hoc addition in development, to the gradual process of factoring gender equity as a definite component in policy making. It shall trace its trajectory through that first call made by Mahatma Gandhi to involve women in national life via the freedom struggle. Subsequently, we shall examine this process in the light of trade unionism and the women's movement. We shall also see how policy making has been shaped by cultural positioning, research, the diverse gender divisions of labour, resources and power and how this has created a gender disaggregated data base for use in future policy. Given that women's equal participation in the decision making process, policy making and planning is vital to ensure that their concerns are integrated in the development process, we shall see how those theories and concepts helped to inform the development practice and what were the practical frameworks, for example, the five year plans, which were used to integrate gender perspective into the planning process. We shall also see the extent to which this has succeeded and what are the areas that need to be addressed.

Participation, empowerment and inclusion have become the new development buzzwords. As the development mainstream takes on some of the practices of participatory development, feminist concerns about representation, agency and voice become ever more urgent. Amidst rhetoric about 'full participation' and the involvement of 'all stakeholders', there are reasons to suspect that the very projects and processes that appear so inclusive and transformative, may turn out to be regressive and support a status quo that is highly inequitable for women.

Male hegemony compromises development initiatives, which can make a positive difference in women's lives. This is especially visible in the way development has been fashioned with women, particularly in areas of income generation, the handling of violence against women and domestic violence; and particularly so when we talk of participatory approaches for sustainable development.

What is of special concern is that men tend to avoid attending to or participating in discussion of issues that relate primarily to the concerns of women. Development with women has therefore

largely been development for women by women with women and therein lies some of the seeds of under-achievement.

## **The Freedom Struggle and its Aftermath**

To go back to history, women first entered the public arena as a part of the Nationalist struggle for freedom between the 1930's and 1947. This initiation was encouraged by National leaders in order to combine women's natural nurturing instincts with political life and was also used as a platform for reforming some of the terrible social practices of the day, such as purdah and sati. Gandhi too, according to some historians saw women as embodying the talents of tolerance and self-suffering needed for non-violent struggle. For him women were an oppressed group and because of this they had acquired the qualities of endurance that needed to be harnessed for the nation's deliverance. Similarly the nationalists too endorsed this viewpoint.\* [1]

In the twenty five to thirty years following independence in 1947, a few attempts were made to improve the status of women, key among these being the constitutional guarantees for equality. However gender equality remained a largely unfulfilled promise and as noted by the CSWI (Committee on the Status of Women in India) there was a regression from some of the norms developed during the Freedom Movement. It also argued that the women had remained 'invisible' because the women's questions had been projected as a social rather than a political issue. [2] The women's movement in the post 1975 era tried to rectify that mistake.

The publication of the CSWI report was followed by the declaration of emergency. While democratic rights were abolished and thousands thrown into jail, ironically the ICSSR, the country's apex research body began a sponsored programme on women's studies in 1975. It had a broad mandate that included the generation and analysis of data to uncover significant trends in women's positions, the development of new perspectives in the social sciences and the revival of the debate on the women's questions.

### **Reality Check in the 70s**

At this time the *Towards Equality: Report of the Committee on the Status of Women in India Report* published in 1975 'presented a grim picture of social reality and trends of change that sharply contrasted with the goals of equality laid down by the Indian Constitution'. [3] Instead of improving their condition, the Report revealed, the nearly three decades of independence had aggravated gender imbalances in terms of sex ratio, life expectancy, employment and educational opportunities, morbidity, mortality and migration rates. The Report attributed the lack of concern for women's problems to the absence of an active women's movement even though a number of political organizations had taken to mobilizing women for a number of issues. During this time several issues caught the reformist eye of women activists including that of rape. It first began with the case of a poor Muslim woman Rameeza Bee in 1978 followed by the Mathura rape case. There were also loud appeals to examine the laws of the land while the evil practice of dowry caught the anger of the activists as newspapers began reporting the deaths of young wives through 'accidental burning by the stoves in their own kitchen.' During this period the infamous Shahbano case also transpired, where a divorced Muslim woman was granted a small maintenance for herself and her children from her husband, but because of fear of a Muslim backlash the state intervened and reversed the judgment. Once again this evoked vociferous protests from the public and particularly women's groups.

## **Organizing Ourselves**

Central to the political movement of the 1970s was the radicalization of the younger generation of women though few organizations existed at that time. The CSWI (1975) had argued that women had remained invisible from the larger movements in the country because the women's question had been projected as a social rather than a political issue. The organizations which now emerged sought to address these lacunae. Some of these were: POW Progressive Organization of Women (Hyderabad) Shramik Sangathana (Maharashtra), Textile Labour Association (Ahmedabad) of whose breakaway group was the path breaking organization SEWA (Self Employed Women's Association), Chatra Yuva Sangharsh Vahini (Bihar) and others. These organizations also provided the space required from the rigid hierarchical orders in traditional Trade union and political structures, where women's questions were largely peripheral even to their women's wings. As a reaction to this, AIDWA (All India Democratic Women's Association) was formed in 1981. All India Women's Conference, Joint Women's Program, National Federation of Indian women, Centre of Women's Development Studies and scores of similar organizations both large and small were also formed.

Many of these Autonomous Women's Groups (AWGs) chose a decentralized organizational structure doing away with the traditional hierarchy of control and power base, which kept them at the periphery of larger parties and organizations. They followed interesting structural patterns, some operating as leaderless collectives, working on a voluntary rotation of tasks, taking consensual decision making with an emphasis on inter-personal relationships and political diversity.

It was the coherent and sustained campaigns from women's groups supported by an activist media, where women journalists had entered in droves that led to the passing of the Vishaka judgement by the highest court of the land. This bill specified all the violations that could be constituted as sexual harassment; it defined what the workplace was and also stipulated that all working organizations should implement the Vishakha guidelines in their work environment. Another major victory for women organizations that have been fighting a long and sustained campaign against domestic violence was the passing of the Domestic violence bill by the Government of India on 8<sup>th</sup> March, 2002. It laid stringent punishment for those inflicting violence on their partners, and signals a major victory for women's groups who had been waging a long battle for a proper definition of a term, which they felt should adhere to UN stipulated guidelines. While there are some shortfalls in the bill, it does seek to break the culture of silence that surrounds this practice, based as it is on the worst interpretation of patriarchy, where because of lack of empowerment, lack of options by way of parental support or short stay homes and of course a belief in their own inferiority, women allow themselves to be subjected to this battering.

### **State Initiatives and the Lacunae**

The women's movement has also helped to increase the realization that without engendering, development is endangered. Gender audit of decentralization of political governance has revealed that elected women in the local self government bodies, legislative bodies and parliament have played a positive role in addressing, or attempting to address, a range of practical gender needs—inadequacies in living conditions such as provision of fuel, water, healthcare and employment). However, their impact on strategic gender needs—affirmative action by the state, proactive role of the employers to enhance women's position in the economy and to execute measures to enhance women's health status—is not remarkable as they lack financial autonomy in governance. [4] They have also demanded for strategic gender tools like gender audits, gender impact assessments, gender analysis and gender budgeting to monitor implementation and impacts. Gender audit of plans, policies and programmes of various Ministries with pro-women allocations has to be a part and parcel of the monitoring process. There is also a need for provisions in the

composite programmes under education, health and rural development sectors to target them specifically at girls/women as the principal beneficiaries and disaggregated within the total allocation. It may also be necessary to place restrictions on their re-appropriation for other purposes. A recent survey of *panchayats* (village councils) working in 19 states, conducted by the National Institute of Rural Development, Hyderabad suggested that panchayats remain toothless because functional and financial autonomy has not been granted to the PRIs. The study by the Institute of Social Sciences shows that the extent of fiscal decentralization through the empowerment of PRIs has been very little. The five Year Plans in the pre-1975 treated women as supplementary earners, while in the post 1975 period women have been treated as active economic agents.

### **The Quest for Identity**

While the women's movement is an ongoing struggle in India, which works at different levels, there are certain questions that seek urgent resolution. The primary one being that of identity, which is under a constant threat, as the state and fundamentalist religious groups have taken over some of women's spaces, symbols language slogans and solutions. Since religion plays a central role in the country, women are faced with stark choices of how to juggle these multiple identities or how to prioritize one identity over the other, without compromising on their solidarity as women. Some answers have emerged from within the women themselves, as many activists have emphatically defended their stance of keeping social structures away from faith, since religion cannot resolve problems emerging from the former. At the same time there are other tensions within the movement itself, representing as it does the wide spectrum of religion, cultures, location, linguistic and occupational identities. Far from being apologetic about it, activists recognize that these differences could be a source of strength, "to perceive the range of responses within the women's movement and the existence of the plurality of the women's movement [5] if women remained alert to the various methods used by patriarchy to use these differences to undermine women.

Again, grass root empowerment also needs to be viewed from the standpoint of the share of grass root women in the women's movement. [6] While there is little doubt that the vitality of the Indian women's movement owes a great deal to the pressures generated from the grassroots, what is of primary importance while examining the connectivity between the two components, is the question: to what extent has the women's movement been able to carry the grass roots? So far what has been achieved has been the views of grassroots women expressed by women who have either appropriated their voices or who are basically intermediaries. But to really address the challenges which are going to emerge, as the world's economy comes under stress and the resultant spin offs in terms of displacement, deprivation, poverty and an increasing violence face us, would be to have the grassroots women speak in their own voices and also, importantly, find an audience for them. There is still a debate revolving around the process of grass root level empowerment. This concept of empowerment is intrinsic to the development and mainstreaming of large sections of the society which face all the inequities enforced by poverty, low literacy levels, invisibility of women and the subordination of women in a patriarchal society. While looking at the women's movement there are really very few examples which show any form of indigenous organization of women from certain sections of society. It therefore shows that this would be possible only through external interventions of some kind and has been accepted as the only possible solution considering the immensity of the task involved and given the nature of the targeted section. A major contributor to this is the nature of poor women's work, and the burden of their increasing labour obligations and their diminishing social and cultural worth. Some of these factors also contribute to the complacent assumptions made vis a vis grass root women workers both by governmental and non governmental agencies coupled as it is with incomplete data and information about the life styles, work patterns, mental capacities

of poor women. Many of these factors result in haphazard policy initiatives and implementation while working at improving the conditions of these women. For example, there is evidence to show that although at the policy level many state governments agreed to transfer land to grass root women's groups, at the operational level hurdles and harassment are more the order of the day. These unfortunate examples emerged in the case of poor women in Gujarat and Rajasthan when running awareness generation campaigns against alcoholism, or in Andhra Pradesh for the same issue. There have been attempts to malign these movements as class or caste movements, which trivializes them and certainly compromises issues of their empowerment. This means that the women's movement is faced with the question of the sustainability of grass root groups supported by or organized by the government and makes government attempts at grass root women empowerment itself, suspect.

## **Women and their Working World**

The organized sector is defined as that which is covering the labour force employed in all the work within the public sector and only the non agricultural establishments in the private sector which has more than 10 employees. [7] This criterion has been defined by the Factories Act which covers all establishments with 10 or more employees. "The unorganized sector usually consists of productive activities with loosely formed groups bound by diverse types of informal working contracts. It includes a section of the self employed, the wage earners, and family producers as also household workers." [8] According to a survey carried out by the National Sample Survey Organization (NSSO) out of the total workforce of 397 million only 28 million workers are employed in the formal sector. As per the survey there were 44.35 million enterprises and 79.77 million workers in the non-agricultural informal sector of the economy. Of the workers in the informal sector, 70.21 million are full time and 9.5 million are part time workers. The Informal economy provides a major occupational outlet for women in India, making an overwhelming 90 percent of the women workforce engaged in this economy. In 2004-5 there were 29.5 million women workers in the unorganized non-agricultural sector a total of 20.2 percent of the entire workforce. The informal sector plays a vital role in terms of providing employment opportunities to a large segment of the work force in the country and contributes to the national product significantly. [9]

This work is characterized with low earnings, long unregulated hours of work, unpaid leave, no social securities or medical /insurance facilities or other social security benefits. These conditions directly contravene the guidelines laid out by ILO while defining decent work. [10] The goal must be to make these informal activities part of the growing formal sector that provides decent jobs, income and protection ...this will be an essential part of defining national strategy to reduce poverty. [11] Hence policies must be formed to deal with the lack of recognition of qualifications and skills, and the exclusion of workers from social benefits and securities.

Economic analysis and policies related to women have for long limited themselves to discussing their employment neglecting the crucial determinant of women's economic neglect namely the gender gap on command over property. It is argued here that the gender gap in the ownership and control of property is the single most critical contributor to the gender gap in economic well-being, social status and empowerment. In primarily rural economic like South Asia the most important property is arable land. [12] This need for ownership of land has three major components: welfare, efficiency, equality and empowerment.

a) For the first, rights in land could reduce women's own and the household's risk of poverty and destitution. It has been corroborated by several research findings that suggest that children's nutritional status tends to be much more positively linked to the mother's earnings than the father's



[13] To take this argument forward it can be said that the risk of poverty and the physical well-being of a woman and her children could depend significantly on whether she has or does not have direct access to income and productive assets such as land and not just access mediated through her husband or other male relatives.

b) The efficiency argument: in several contexts, women are operating as household heads with the primary and often sole responsibility for organizing cultivation and ensuring family subsistence but without having the titles to the land they are cultivating. This is most often true in the cases of males migrating where the women become heads of the household in absentia or again in the cases of widows who may have inherited the land from their spouses. In the absence of titles the women are supremely compromised in situations where they need loans etc. Again, it would also help women to opt for better technological cultivation of land which would improve efficiency.

c) The equality and empowerment argument: the link between equality of rights over productive resources directly challenges male dominance not only over economic issues but has far reaching social and cultural repercussions, which do usher in more empowerment for the women. It could be defined as a process that enhances the ability of disadvantaged individuals or groups to challenge and change existing power relationships that place them in subordinate economic, social and political positions. [12]

However, a positive step undertaken by the State for the empowerment of women into the political process is—though at the grass roots level of the political world—local governance or Panchayat Raj, with 33 percent positions reserved for women. Through the experience of the Indian Panchayat Raj Institutions (PRI) 1 million women have actively entered political life in India. Since the creation of the quota system, local women—the vast majority of them illiterate and poor, have come to occupy as much as 43 percent of the seats, spurring the election of increasing numbers of women at the district, provincial and national levels. Since the onset of PRI, the percentage of women in various levels of political activity has risen from 4-5 percent to 25-40 percent. PRI then demonstrates an example of positive intervention by the state. This could perhaps be a first step for the larger participation of women in the political process, while honing their leadership skills. Women leaders are demanding for a similar reservation in the country's parliament, where their participation remains abysmally low at less than 10 percent, but so far the male opposition has maintained its victory. A dichotomy still faces the women's movement as to how to maximize the relationship with politics and political processes in the light of PRI. Some analysts feel that this could have been an effective tool for affirmative action by training nearly 1 million women in the democratic processes but that would have needed a 'change in women's perceptions of their own identities and the language of the dominant political discourse', which didn't happen. [14]

## Conclusion

A number of challenges arise before us when we look at **participatory development** and questions are asked about who participates, in what and on what basis, who benefits and who loses out. This proposal seeks to address some of these questions and challenges.

In doing so, we discuss strategies and tactics that have been used in efforts to make participatory development more **gender sensitive**. What is important is also how 'gender' is interpreted and deployed in development settings. The pervasive practice of 'involving women' and 'addressing gender' may be tactically, expedient, but it provokes a series of questions about the extent to which current understandings of 'gender' in development mask other inequalities and forms of exclusion. Making a difference requires **rethinking 'gender'** and addressing more directly the issues of power

and powerlessness that lies at the heart of both Gender and Development and participatory development.

Re-examining approaches to participation, income generation and reducing violence against women is the key to understanding how to make development with women more productive, inclusive and effective. We need to adopt two of the most important strategies employed to enhance development with women: gender mainstreaming and gender training. These strategies need to be linked in a more holistic way so that gender training is seen as a capacity building in its widest sense. Gender training needs to become more process oriented without losing the skill based elements so necessary for project development and management. In the long term, gender training must move beyond sensitization and awareness, not only towards developing competence and skills in recognizing and dealing with gender issues in the workplace but also towards transferring these skills to the personal level. In short, gender training should be addressing basic personal change. **In the long run it becomes the primary tool for achieving mainstreaming.**

*Notes:*

\* The nationalists are said to have resolved the women's question by creating a new educated woman who would be as Grihalaxmi, the guardian of Hindu culture in the family and Kulalaxmi, the preserver of the honour of the family lineage. She would be the symbol of sacrifice for the sake of the family and the nation but would not be a free agent to assert her own individuality.

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