

Women's Multiple Roles: The Need for Social Infrastructure

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Abstract: - Women community leadership will need to be identified and included in committees that may be formed under various sectors, to ensure that women are included in planning for sectors other than social development, such as infrastructure, use of common lands, natural resources and employment.

Key words: Recognition, multiple roles, social infrastructure, WGFE, BIMARU States

In this essay we argue that policies that are considered social or which are supposed to give social support in terms of health, education and other needs to women need to be seen in the context of what poor women need as the basis for the social policies to have useful outcomes. Thus the argument here is that amongst the least privileged, most economically deprived for flunged backward area, recognition of women as productive vital agents of family and environment should be a pre-condition for addressing their 'social needs'.

Recognition of women as agents who bring about change in their own lives and in the lives of others, even more than the men of their families and communities, should be a crucial underpinning for social policies. Social policies often presume that women are in some sense weaker and needier of support, less able to spend for themselves and generally subordinate to men and the outside world. But in reality, especially when we go down the economic scale of families or the households where the poor congregate and poverty predominates- reveals that the situation is otherwise.

Much of the maintenance of such households, whether it is basic needs like water, fuel, food and cares provided by women. Further in most households women attempt to bring in somewhere with all whether it is monetary or in kind. In deeply distressed situations like famine, when drought hits areas that are farm lands, and the households do not have any access to their normal supply of foods-it is women who will dig up roots, pick berries and find ways of feeding the household.

This point about women's critical role in the survival of families, communities and society is a crucial premise on which to build, what can be called, social support policy. Noble laureate Amartya Sen as this to say" We need a vision of mankind not as patients whose interests have to be looked

after, but as agents who can do effective things- both individually and jointly. We also have to go beyond the role human beings specifically as "consumers" or as 'people with needs' and consider, more broadly, their general role as agents of change who can-given opportunity-think, assess, evaluate, resolve, inspire, agitate, and through this means reshape the world'.

There are several impediments to women being given the kind of social support by social development policies, as required. The first impediment is the way they are perceived. Earlier in the decade of 1970s, household surveys which collect data, and which in turn forms policies, were designed such that women were put in the category of less able, i.e widows, destitute etc. It was considered that they were basically in need of social welfare services.. It took many decades of work by members of the women's movement to show that women were critical economic agents in every community and society and therefore cannot be treated only as objects of welfare but needed to be treated as those who are contributing to the economy and therefore apart from recognition of their role, monetary reward as well as economic and social support to make their work yield better returns, was crucial.

Currently, there is a strong well documented demand world wide that women 's role of caring for children and under aged, and housework should be not only recognized but monetized in order to ensure that the time they spend on this, which often is almost all the time is rewarded monetarily The fact that they do this kind of work for a large part of the day deprives them of the opportunity to go out and earn a wage as men do, hence the recognition is crucial.

Thus, recognition of women's work are broadening the definition of work in order that the kind of work that women do is understood, counted and valued is one of the first steps that is necessary for women to be enabled to lead lives of good health and wellbeing.

Data collection and on both individual as well as households needs to be improved dramatically. Data collection systems have tended to see man as the principle bread winner of every household and women as supplementary breadwinners or only dependents. However

studies done both in India and abroad, not only use time, but also the economic contribution of women, even if it is non-monitized, have revealed that women especially amongst the landless and the poor households contribute as much if not more, to both economic and social output than men. Hence, improved collection of data is critical for the understanding as well as police response to women.

Most standard employment questionnaires, and specifically the Indian questionnaire, denote the activity of each member of the households in a format such that domestic activity traps the female and excludes her, even if she is engaged in part time 'productive' work.

Renana Jhavvala in her study also echoes the same-

"Women often remain invisible and unrecognized as workers, both because they are women and because work in the informal economy is often hidden. The work and contributions of women to the economy, as well as in the family and community, or persistently under valued, particularly when women are home based worker, paid domestic or care workers or unpaid contributing workers in family businesses or on family farms. Focusing on their role as workers rather than homemakers or child care providers serves the under score the fact that women are economic agent who contribute to their households and the economy and therefore should be considered a target of economic as well as social policies."

During the preparation of the 11th Five Year Plan (2007-2012)³, the Planning Commission instituted a group of women economists, Working Group of Feminists Economists (WGFE)⁴, to look at not only the drafting of the 'Women and Development' chapter which is the conventional procedure but also to look at the main chapters which cover infrastructure, industry, agriculture etc. When these chapters were scrutinized, one of the suggestions made by the group was that in the 'infrastructure Development' chapter, which is one of the important once in terms of budget allocation, there should be something called the, 'Social Infrastructure' or, 'Soft Infrastructure'

Soft Infrastructure would mean support services which are considered enabling for women in the poorest amongst the poorest, to participate in the community and the economy. For example,, when ideal was to have a building complex where support systems like water source, crèche, balavade, toilets as well as bathing places, even a kitchen and clothes washing places are all in one complex. This complex is built with all the existing funds that we have for providing these services. This can be put under infrastructure as it would require investment in building, electricity and other such services which are often given to large office buildings and complexes which are meant for the middle and upper classes in cities.

Thus, a women from the weaker sections in the society and trapped in poverty, instead of leaving household work to her

eldest daughter as it is often done in these households of having to walk nice to bring fuel and water, has assessed to it as a community building service. She can leave her child in the crèche, bake her chapattis in the common fuel source, wash her clothes and then go to work.

One of the most startling statistics that was brought to the attention of the policy makers in the 1970s was to show the convergence between female morality and This d female work participation rates. Women in the age group 20-35 had the maximum participation rate in the age specific table of participation. However it was in this very age group that we noticed that highest morality rates amongst women This was particularly so in the poorest areas of India where there is a density of population of the poor- what used to be called the DIMARU States-Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh⁵. Such data shows the link between women's compulsion or pressure to earn a living for their household which make them participate and the toll which it has on their health as the other services also have to be performed by them. Hence, this argument that social welfare and social policy services need to be linked deeply into women's economic roles especially when we address the poorest sections of the population.

CONCLUSION

Measures can be taken to be effective only when special attention is given to women and disadvantaged groups so as to enable them to take a lead in planning. For eg, in surveys involved in the planning process, it needs to be ensured that women's views are especially sought, including through focus group discussions. Women community leadership will need to be identified and included in committees that may be formed under various sectors, to ensure that women are included in planning for sectors other than social development, such as infrastructure, use of common lands, natural resources, and employment.

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