

INDIAN WOMEN IN THE EIGHTIES THE DEVELOPMENT IMPERATIVES

All India Women's Conference, New Delhi, 1980

INTRODUCTION

The first half of the International Women's Decade represented for Indian women a period of research, review, rethinking, and re-affirmation of the principle of equality-developed during the freedom struggle and the concurrent women's movement of that period. Contrary to general expectations research revealed that the condition of women, particularly of the masses of poor and rural women has been declining over the last few decades, as indicated by trends in the sex ratio, economic participation, migration, and health and educational status. The rising wave of crimes and violence against women provoked an outburst of women's anger and protests across the country. Within the Government also a certain amount of rethinking of policies and development programmes has been going on, in response to the alarming demographic trends and rising anger among women. The results of such rethinking were reflected in the suggestions made by official delegations to various international conferences and have come to be recognised as the 'Indian perspective' on women's equality and development. This perspective leans very heavily on planning measures to expand and deepen women's role and effective share in all aspects of development as the essential step towards realisation of their equality in society.

It is in this context that the undersigned women's organisations decided to hold a symposium on 'Indian Women in The Eighties: Development Imperatives' to ensure that women's needs and expectations receive due representation within the Sixth Five Year Plan. It is our responsibility to draw the attention of Government to these imperative needs so that the mistakes of the past are not repeated again. We also believe that it is our special task to make a larger section of society men and women equality aware of these needs and issues in women's development, if the goals of our nation which coincide with the goals of the International Women's Decade are to be realised.

We are grateful to Dr. M. S. Swaminathan, Member, Planning Commission who readily accepted our invitation to address the Symposium. We are also grateful to Prof. Asok Mitra, Professor of Population Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University for accepting our invitation to Chair the meeting. Participants included members of various women's organisations, government officers, representatives of international agencies involved in programmes for women's development, and media representatives. The symposium was held at the India International Centre on the 10th September 1980 and examined the needs of women within the national priorities identified in the Sixth Five Year Plan Framework recently endorsed by the National Development Council.

Tracing the history of the concern for women at the international and national level during the last three decades, Prof. Asok Mitra observed that this concern has still to be recognised as an independent developmental issue. Belated attention to women's problems has come in the wake of the concern for population control. Experience of population policies and the family planning

movement demonstrated that women's development remains the most crucial determinant for reduction of the birth-rate which is a critical need for national development. He congratulated the women's organisations for holding the symposium at this time as it was imperative to ensure that women's needs received due attention and resources financial and infrastructural - in the coming Five Year Plan.

Welcoming the efforts of the symposium organizers, Dr. M.S. Swaminathan observed that the goal of social emancipation of women would remain an impossible dream without their economic emancipation, educational progress and development of higher skills. Programmes for women's development must promote economic viability and expansion of productive resources and not degenerate into mere relief measures. Women in India have always played a major role in the economy, particularly in agriculture, forestry, animal husbandry, handicrafts, etc. ignoring the remarkable skills of women in Planning development strategies reduces the development Potential of the nation as a whole, institutionalised interventions are necessary to harness these valuable skills of women to the cause of national development to ensure a sustained and self-generating momentum for over-all development.

While criticism of previous policies for their failure to conceptualise the role of women adequately was valuable, he requested the assistance of women's organisations, institutions, and social scientists to operationalise the needed programme thrusts and to improve management of development programmes to prevent wastage of scarce resources, educated women, and women's institutions must play a far more active and effective role in this area than they had done in the past particularly in rural areas. It is essential to link various intervention efforts of educational institutions, women's organisations as well as government agencies, structurally at the local levels - to maximise results.

In response to the participants' criticism of the inadequate attention to women in the Plan framework and its emphasis on the family/household oriented approach which ignores women's rights as individuals, he assured the symposium that the Planning Commission would welcome constructive suggestions for incorporation in the final Plan.

There was a consensus of opinion that under-development of women is a major obstacle to national development itself. Their developmental needs should not therefore be viewed as marginal or peripheral, but should form an integral part of development strategies in all sectors. Failure to do so prevents realisation of national objectives.

Women's needs are closely interrelated, and must be provided for in an integrated manner, While family planning services are essential for women, they can not by themselves realise the national population objective of reducing the birth-rate, unless they are linked with policies for improving women's employment, health and educational status.

Promoting adequate development efforts for women at different levels and creating needed channels for women to participate effectively in decisions that affect their lives require organised efforts by women's groups and institutions. Such efforts are particularly needed at the grass-root level, to mobilise women against exploitation, discrimination and oppression - in their work lives, and within the family. Women's organisations must prepare themselves to play such a role effectively in the coming years.

The recommendations of the symposium that follow are based on the intensive work done by various Committees, Expert Groups, and Women's Conferences during the last five years and discussions during a full day at the symposium. We are placing them before the Government and the public with the demand that women's imperative needs are not ignored in the development efforts proposed over the next five years.

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INDIAN WOMEN IN THE EIGHTIES: THE DEVELOPMENT IMPERATIVES

The symposium examined the current needs and expectations of Indian women in the context of the Sixth Five Year Plan whose frame-work was recently endorsed by the National Development Council and the review of women's situation within the process of development that has 'gone on in India during the last decade.

2. The investigations of the Committee on the Status of Women in India (1971-74) resulted in the unanimous resolution of Parliament requesting the Prime Minister to mount a comprehensive programme of legislative and executive action to remove disabilities and disparities that condemned large groups of Indian women to a life of deprivation, inequality and injustice. A number of committees and working groups appointed by the Government since 1975 have recommended concrete strategies and action programme to translate this parliamentary mandate into reality.¹ The symposium also noted that many of these concrete suggestions has been echoed by national and state level conferences.

3. It was also noted that India through its official delegations had played an extremely constructive role in various international forums that discussed ways of enhancing women's role in development and promoting their equality in all spheres of society. The package of ideas in the way of concrete measures and strategies that emanated from various Indian delegations to the conferences on Women,² represent a synthesis of the recommendations of the various groups mentioned in paragraph 2.

4. The symposium was of the view that unless explicit provision for the imperative developmental needs of women is made in the Sixth Five Year Plan, the conditions of women will continue to decline, notwithstanding Constitutional pledges of equality and justice and the parliamentary mandate for removal of disparities and discrimination. The grimness of their situation is too well established by major socio-economic and demographic indicators to require further mention, The recent increase in crimes and violence against women of which the Government has already taken note, reflects trends towards the devaluation of women which need to be combated, not only by legislation but by concrete measures to improve their social and economic base. The symposium noted with distress that new trends of decline have emerged even in the higher education sector,³ particularly in medical education which had earlier been regarded as areas of success in removing women's inequality.

5. The Fifth Five Year Plan was formulated before the identification of the serious problems facing women in this country was complete, and no major action could therefore be initiated during the Fifth Plan period. The mid-term Plan for 1978-83 mentioned some of the disturbing features, particularly in employment and recognised the intimate relationship between policies for improving women's employment and general status, and the national objectives for reducing population growth and improving the health and welfare of children.

6. The symposium felt strongly that it would be a national tragedy not only for women, but for the nation as a whole and particularly for the next generation, if the Sixth Plan failed to provide explicit directions and provisions to arrest the declining trend in women's situation by accelerating their participation in the process of development

particularly in the areas of employment, health and education. It would be unfortunate if the 'Indian perspective' on women's equality and development - now incorporated in the Programme of Action adopted by the World Conference of the United Nations Decade and the Non-aligned Nations - was to be left out of India's Plan itself, denying to Indian women the benefit of these strategies and concrete measures.

7. It is now admitted that the growing gap between men's and women's participation is becoming a major obstacle in accelerating the process of national development. The symposium urges that its recommendations be incorporated within the final plan not merely in the interest of one section but that of the nation itself.

Recommendation: A

Replacement of Family/Household Approach in Programme Thrusts by explicit mention of women as target group.

8. Non-recognition or 'tacit silence' of women's economic and decision-making roles and their major contribution to the survival of the family-particularly in rural areas and among all poverty stricken groups across the country resulted in one of the identified 'negative' impacts of development-on women's capacity to effectively support themselves and their children. This also affected the success of many such programmes.⁴ Programmes for productivity and employment generation did not view women as target groups and failed to notice the economic displacement of women that came in the wake of various measures for modernization of agriculture, rural marketing system, and modernization and mechanisation of occupations traditionally held by women.

9. The exercises of the past 10 years have identified that this 'invisibility' of women to programme planners and administrators was rooted in the established tendency to view women only through the screen of families or households and not as individuals in their own right, on the assumption that any development for the family would necessarily benefit all its members.⁵ It is surprising that the Plan frame-work which admits the mistake of "lumping the very poor along with the relatively better off sections of the community" which prevents the percolation of the benefits to the "most deprived section of the community" should ignore the inequality within the household which has in the past prevented women's access to education, training, employment and participation in decision-making bodies. It is no secret that women and girls constitute the largest group among unpaid family labour and the lowest paid, unorganised, casual and exploited labour, illiterates and school drop-outs, and the victims of malnutrition and inadequate health care.

10. Relevant here is also the evidence that a considerable part of the income of men, even from poverty alleviation or employment affirmation programmes, is spent on non-familial expenditure e.g. alcohol, gambling, radios etc., while that of women is spent entirely on obtaining better nutrition for the family. Programmes developed on the basis of the family household approach will reinforce the perspective of women's economic role as marginal and supplemental. The transfer of assets, technologies and services designed as instruments for these programmes will again bypass women and provide them with no safeguards. Such an approach is likely to ignore the need for child-care services at public works sites (as is the case at present). The widely prevalent practice of paying wages to male household heads, while the major work is done by women and children, will be reinforced by this approach.

11. A typical illustration of asset transfer generating intra-household inequality is the case of distribution of rural house sites and surplus agricultural land. Women from agricultural labour families have pointed out in camps/meetings organised by

Government agencies, that increasing incidence of desertion, divorce and eviction of women and children in such families ensure little security to them if the redistributed land is only in the name of the male head of household. Similarly ownership of land is practically a minimum requirement for access to credit in the rural sector, and women's lack of control over this asset is a basic cause for growing intra-household inequality.⁶

Recommendation: B

Introduction of a 'Special Component approach with ear-marked resources in all sectoral plans and programmes in the Centre and the States.

12. A major benefit from the review of development from the women's perspective was the identification of some essential devices to prevent this overlooking of women's need by explicit mention of women as a target group in all major sectoral programmes through the concept of special component Plans and ear-marked resources.⁷ The plan document includes this approach but only under the head of programmes for the educated unemployed. What is needed is a directive for the special component approach, with ear-marked resources, and separate monitoring arrangements in each of the sectoral programme thrusts. This is particularly necessary in view of the indifference to women's situation and needs that pervades at all levels of government functionaries the state planning authorities, and local decision making bodies.

13. Failure to mention the 'women's dimension' in the Poverty Removal Programmes could certainly result in insufficient attention to female-headed households, which constitute as much as 35% of destitute households in some parts of the country. Their social and physical constraints (e.g. lack of information and inadequate mobility) would stand in their way of obtaining even the minimum assistance offered under these programmes unless programme administrators had clear directives to identify and assist such house-holds. Even the proposed "integrated rural-urban employment strategy" which visualises ensuring gainful employment "to at least one adult member per family" may, unless clarified be interpreted as implying gainful employment for one male member, generally assumed to be the main bread winner. Given the low level of wages that prevail in the poverty sectors such a policy will undermine the ability of these households to rise above poverty line in addition it will impose a typical middle class social value-of the economic dependence of women on their men on proper households where women have traditionally.

14. The special component approach is particularly necessary in programmes designed for acceleration rural development, credit dispersal to weaker sections, and promoting opportunities for gainful employment. Evaluations of previous programmes provide ample evidence that in all attempts at provision of assets, technology, services, training, credit and other inputs - women, particularly the poor and rural women have received only marginal attention - and that only when their case was championed by someone powerful within the bureaucracy (as for instance in the case of the farmer's training camps) or a powerful organisation (like the Textile Labour Association in Ahmedabad - whose backing enabled the members of the Self-Employed Women's Association to obtain bank credit for the first time).

15. The task visualised for extension agencies to create awareness and to assist the poor in using the support that is offered is vital - but without specific instructions to expand the cadre of women extension workers, and compulsion to reach a share of the support credit, training, employment etc. to women, there will be a repetition of past neglect. There are innumerable examples - of proposals for dairy training for women being

negated by the Office of the Milk Commissioner, the disappearance of the rare camps for women farmers since the transfer of the scheme to the state sector, and the long-drawn story of ambivalence, neglect and even jettisoning of the Mahila Mandal Programme in different States. Many of them have totally dismantled even the highly limited apparatus created for rural women's development under the Community Development Programme. Cadre posts have been diverted to other sectors, and the few remaining have not been trained to be effective in the new areas of technology and credit promotion, but kept confined mainly to nutrition, health and population education with some craft training - often in non-marketable products.

16. The two lessons of the Maharashtra Employment Guarantee Scheme and the Food for Work Programme are :- (a) the acute need of poor rural women for employment, and (b) heavy manual labour and absence of supportive services in the way of child-care, maternity protection etc. tax the health of malnourished and over burdened women from labour households and affect the welfare of their families to the point that some of them are compelled to withdraw. The proposed NREP, if it ignores these lessons would certainly fail to assist a large number of women who need this employment desperately.

17. The special component approach is necessary not to separate women's needs into a separate sector of women's programmes but to create the awareness among planners and development administrators, that women have some additional constraints-the removal of which must be built in to the programme, if it is to be effective in reaching women.

18. It should be remembered that this special component approach to women's developmental needs, particularly within agriculture and allied sectors, industry, education, health, labour and employment, and social welfare, with non-divertible funds and special monitoring of their utilization represents the cornerstone of the 'Indian perspective' evolved through successive International Conferences (Baghdad, ESCAP & Copenhagen). It is obvious that designing the special component, with its structural necessities of human, infrastructural and other resources is going to require considerable understanding and administrative and organisational underpinning along with emphasis on training programmes for new cadres of government agencies - by State Governments and national development agencies - to meet the situational constraints and needs of women. Such a process of sensitisation would be valuable in itself from the nation's point of view, and would help eliminate one major obstacle to national development-the problem of woman's invisibility.

Recommendation : C

Provision of network of child-care centres within the minimum needs programme.

19. This is a minimum requirement-if women are to benefit from, and participate in any developmental activity. Secondly, this will provide an essential support to other national objectives:

- (a) of universalising elementary education by improving girls enrolment, and reducing drop-outs;
- (b) of improving child-health through immunisation and better nutrition;
- (c) of reducing the birth rate-through reduction of infant mortality, and
- (d) it will open up an employment avenue for some women in both rural and urban areas.

Recommendation:D

Expansion of Training opportunities for women particularly in agriculture and agro-based industries, and non-traditional (i.e. non-stereotyped) and more skilled industrial occupation and trades

20. The special component approach within the Employment Promotional programmes would need to emphasise the necessity of improving women's productivity and employability. We endorse the recommendations of the Sub-Group on Vocational Training (of the Working Group on Employment of Women):

- i. that such training should be based on some assessment of the market situation and projected developments;
- ii. that women should be encouraged to train in all trades which offer potential employment except a few (previously identified by qualified authority) which are considered injurious to their health and reproductive functions;
- iii. that training and professional institution and programmes for apprenticeship & in- service training introduce reservations for women in all courses with hostels and stipends as special incentives; and
- iv. that mobile training programmes be organised for rural women within the general programmes for agricultural, rural, industrial and infrastructural development.

Recommendation E:

Emphasis on Maternal and Child health and Family Planning as a special component within the primary health-care plan,

21. Without earmarked resources, the MCH sector of health services displays gross neglect in most states resulting in persistence of high maternal and infant mortality. Field evaluations repeatedly indicate non existence or inadequacy of MCH services in many areas particularly in rural India, and lack of coordination between MCH, ICDS, nutrition programmes and family planning.

22. Reduction of the birthrate is admitted as a critical national need, but mere expansion of family planning services, without a determined attack on the social determinants of fertility will not produce the desired results. Successive expert groups and conferences have observed that the surest way to achieving the national objective of the small family norm is women's economic and social emancipation. The special component within the health sector should therefore include:

- i. training of traditional birth attendants and of elderly village women as community health workers to provide improved maternity and family planning services to women in all areas, especially in every village by the end of the Sixth Plan;
- ii. integration of family planning, health and nutritional programmes with those for employment training and income generation to combat malnutrition, infant and maternal mortality among poorer women, as isolated health/nutrition interventions generally fail to reach families below the poverty line;
- iii. development of appropriate technology and infrastructural services to reduce the physical burden of poor women, particularly in the areas of water

supply, sanitation, fuel gathering and housing.

Recommendation: F

Adoption of physical and time targets to reduce male-female gaps in literacy and elementary education.

23. This objective has been reiterated in every Plan, but the gap has continued to grow. A special component approach would need to include the following minimum strategies with adequate provisions-human and material-for their success:

- i. organisation of child-care centres;
- ii. providing financial and material incentives in lieu of lost wages;
- iii. training and recruiting rural women as teachers especially from scheduled caste and tribes;
- iv. providing transport/hostels/other facilities particularly for middle and secondary schools which are often at great distances;

Recommendation: G

Promoting Values of Sex-Equality within and through the Educational Process.

24. Recent studies have indicated that the educational system is not free of biases, and helps to reinforce society's discriminatory attitudes towards women. Some new trends in higher education point to a reduction in women's enrolment in some regions and subjects like medical education, and continued disparities in other professional courses. These problems need immediate attention, if education is to play its due role in removing obstacles to women's equality and development. It is therefore imperative to:

- i. organise effective measures to eliminate biases against women in curricula and teacher training for both formal and non-formal education; ⁸
- ii. provide earmarked resources and directives to the higher education system to expand research and teaching on women as an essential input into the educational system with a view to changing social attitudes and practices that oppose women's equality and development.

Recommendation: H

Development of field cadres, and innovative and empowered agencies within the Government to assist in formulation, implementation and monitoring of special component programmes for women's development.

25. The recognition of the need for some administrative innovations in this field has resulted in the establishment of a few cells within the Ministries of labour and Employment, Social Welfare, Agriculture and Rural Development at the national level. But they continue to be half-hearted gestures without clear definition of functions, authority or resources. Yet the success of the special component approach will depend greatly on:

- i. providing similar mechanisms within all concerned sectoral agencies (Ministries, departments, promotional agencies - e.g. SFDA, NCDC, SSIDC, Banks etc.) at National and State levels with denned functions, authority and resources;

- ii. providing a cadre of women field, extension workers, particularly for programmes under poverty eradication, rural development, employment promotion, agriculture, industry and social services;
- iii. organising training of officers and other cadres in methodologies of situational analysis of women's needs, project formulation, evaluation and advocacy assisting the establishment of specialised agencies (Corporation in each state for promoting women's employment, training and general development and coordinating channelling needed services and inputs (e. g. credit, marketing channels, managerial and organisational assistance etc,). While establishing such bodies it is important to associate women's organisations actively.⁹

Recommendation: I

Improving enforcement of existing laws for the protection of women and women worker and women's access to legal remedies.

26. Recent years have witnessed growing unrest among women against gross violations of women's right as individuals and as workers. Increasing awareness a crimes and discrimination against women has led to demands for new laws, reforms of existing laws, and more effective enforcement. Our experience proves that even the most progressive laws cannot ensure women's protection or enjoyment of their legal rights in the context of (a) general ignorance of laws among the people and particularly women; (b) indifferent or even hostile attitudes of law enforcing authorities and employers; (c) indifference regarding socio-economic implications of laws among various professional groups, particularly legal and judicial professions; and (d) economic handicaps and lack of community support for women seeking justice against discrimination and oppression by employers and their families.

27. Various forums¹⁰ have recommended :

- i. establishment of Family Courts as essential to improve women's access to their rights within the family, as the atmosphere of existing Civil Courts, their procedures and their expenses have an intimidating effect on most women. The informality and social sensitivity that is possible in Family Courts would improve disposal of cases of family conflicts both quantitatively and qualitatively.

28. The other measures needed to improve enforcement and women's access to due legal remedies include:

- ii. supporting institutionalised free legal aid and counselling services for women;
- iii. supporting educational and communication programmes to disseminate information on legal rights and responsibilities among women;
- iv. providing supportive and rehabilitative services to women who lose family or community support in defending their rights as individuals (e. g. victims of dowry, rape, violence within the family, etc.);
- iv. rigorous enforcement of labour laws for the protection of women workers especially the Equal Remunerations Act, with the aid of deterrent punishment for

violation;

- v. association of working women's organisations including women's sub-committees in trade unions, in committees for the enforcement of labour laws and for formulating new policies at all levels;
- vi. change in methods of wage fixation and its payment in agriculture and other unorganized occupations to eliminate discrimination and to ensure that the wage reaches the woman and not the male head of a group or household;
- vii. regularisation of women contract labour, special protection for migrant labour; and
- viii. extension of maternity benefit to all women workers including the agricultural and unorganized workers.

FOOTNOTES

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- 1 Empowered Committee to examine the recommendations of the CSWI 1975-76; the National Plan of Action for Women 1976-77; Planning Commission's Working Group on Employment of Women 1977-78; Min. of Agriculture Working Group on Development of Village Level Organisations of Rural Women 1977-78; Working Group on Adult Education Programmes for Women 1977-78; Working Group on Self-Employment for Women 1978; Min. of Agriculture, National Level Committee on Role and Participation of Women in Agriculture and Rural Development 1979-80; etc.
 - 2 Conference of Non-aligned and other Developing Nations on the Role of Women in Development, Baghdad 1979; UN Commission on the Status of Women 1978 & 1980; the ESCAP Regional Preparatory Conference for UN's Mid-Decade Review, New Delhi 1979; and finally, the UN's Mid-Decade Conference on the International Women's Decade recently held at Copenhagen.
 - 3 Annual Report of the University Grants Commission 1978-79.
 - 4 National Commission on Agriculture (1976).
 - 5 Report of the Committee on the Status of Women in India, Chapter VIII; Working Group on Employment of Women; National Committee Report on Country Review and Analysis of Role and Participation of Women in Agriculture and Rural Development
 - 6 CSWI; Draft Sixth Five Year Plan (1978-83) para 10.97; ICSSR Advisory Committee on Women's Studies-Critical Issues on the Status of Women, 1977. Working Group on Employment of Women 1977-78; Working Group on Adult Education for Women 1977-78; A. Mitra, Indicators for Measuring Women's Participation in Socio-economic Development (Unesco) 1980.
 - 7 Working Group on Employment of Women; National Conference on Women and Development; ESCAP Regional Preparatory Conference for UN's Mid-Decade Review; Conference of Nonaligned and other Developing Nations on the Role of Women in Development, Baghdad.
 - 8 Pursuit of "need-based" or "relevant" education should not increase/reinforce existing biases against women - e. g. by claiming that all that they need is home-science.
 - 9 As recommended by the Working Group on Employment of Women and the National Conference on Woman and Development.
 - 10 CSWI, Baghdad and ESCAP Regional Conference, National Seminar on Dowry Prohibition. The Empowered Committee of GOI which considered the recommendations of the CSWI decided in 1976, to introduce them, on an experimental basis, in the Union Territory of Delhi.