DEVELOPMENT AND WOMEN

Even after a development decade dedicated to women, much remains to be accomplished.

WITH PROGRESS FOR SOME WOMEN AND DEVELOPMENT IN INDIA

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The story of women and development in India really begins with the submission of the Report of the Committee on the Status of Women in India (CSWI) to the Indian Government in 1975, the year the UN-declared Decade for women began. The processes examined by the committee began much earlier, though.

Fairly soon in its investigation, the committee recognized that the "anti-discrimination approach" — reflected in the laws and the dependence on education, legal equality, and the franchise as the major instruments for women's development — had failed to bring about a meaningful transformation of women's status. In fact, significant processes of decline in women's status in the economy and society, which had begun much earlier, had continued unchecked during the period after national independence in 1947. Development planning, instead of altering, had actually accelerated these trends.

The evidence of this decline could be read in the demographic statistics:

- The proportion of women in the Indian population had been declining steadily for over a hundred years. The only reasonable explanation for this lay in the widening gap between male and female mortality. While general mortality rates showed improvement for the population as a whole, male-female disparities, virtually unknown before the 1920s, had widened in all age groups.
- The economic participation rate of women had declined since the early years of the 20th century.
- During the same period, the female migration rate had increased stupendously, till it represented 80 percent of the total internal migration. It had been assumed that this female migration was for marriage and associational reasons, but the CSWI investigation concluded that a large part of female migration was being caused by economic distress and the declining employment situation of women, particularly in rural areas.
- The substantial progress in education hid the rising number and proportion of women illiterates, and most new opportunities for employment were accessible only to the small minority (less than 10 percent) of women who had received some education.

Discovery of these facts turned a limited inquiry into the known and visible facts of women's development into a search for explanations of why the development process did not seem to be delivering women from the burdens of poverty and powerlessness.

Why had the equality clauses of the Constitution benefit-
ted only a minority and failed in the case of the majority? Why had policymakers and social analysts neglected to examine these marked trends in women's economic and health situation? Why had the educational system failed to develop a culture of equality between men and women? Why, in a country which could accept women so readily in positions of high power and dignity (including that of the Prime Minister), was it so difficult for the majority of women to participate in the overall decision-making process, and to influence development decisions in their own favour?

FAILURE OF LAW

A growing realization of the failure of planned development to reduce poverty, unemployment, and inequality in the society added emphasis to the need for new strategies that reached poorer, less-privileged women. Development aggravated inequalities that persisted within traditional roles. While elite women were restricted by cultural traditions from engaging in any visible economic activity, women in the peasantry and other working sections of the population had traditionally played major roles in agriculture, industry, and services. Yet, examination of the official "Five Year" plans of the Indian government revealed that this fact had been totally ignored by the planners. Women were seen only as passive targets of education, health, and welfare programs. Programs for agricultural, industrial, or infrastructural development had, by ignoring women's active role in these fields, contributed to their marginalization at an even faster rate.

Statutory laws, while trying to ensure women's equality, were modelled very often on the laws prevalent in highly industrialized societies, where women's participation in economic activity was marginal. The legislated laws sought to reform the coded laws of the major religious communities — Hindus, Muslims, Parsees, Christians, and Jews — and ignored the uncoded customary laws that were often closer to the realities of poor women's lives.

Custom recognized the multiple roles that women had to play as workers, wives and mothers, and individuals. Some of the customary laws gave greater freedom to women than had ever been enjoyed by women of the elite classes. The right of divorce, of remarriage after widowhood, of a share of property — rights traditionally denied to elite women — were generally prevalent amongst the lower castes and tribes by custom. But the dominant influence of elite culture had been eroding these customs for a long period. While statutory laws brought relief to many women of the elite, the machinery of a statutory law had not come within the reach of the large majority of women, because of their ignorance, poverty, and powerlessness.

Labour laws for the protection of women's maternal functions modelled...
ONE STEP BACK...

Her daughter, Raj Yadav says, was 18 years old and married less than a year when she was held by the arms, doused with gasoline and set afire by her husband, or in-laws, or both. The daughter died.

She was killed. Mrs. Yadav charged, because neither she nor her parents could produce the approximately US$1200 and a television set that had been demanded as an after-the-marriage "dowry."

Such incidents have become known as "dowry deaths," and one surface in India every few days. The case of the Yadav's daughter shocked the world when it was reported in the New York Times. In India, shock is turning to anger among women's groups as dowry deaths — by some estimates, several hundred a year — continue.

Such crimes are universally condemned in public, and the practice of dowry has long since been outlawed. But no one seems to have found a way to deal with the situation effectively.

But one reason is that witnesses to dowry crimes are difficult to find, according to Suman Krishan Kant, a leading women's activist whose Workmen's Grievances Ordinance,年后 arrested in the prosecution of some people accused of dowry killing. According to Mrs. Kant, when witnesses are found, they are frequently intimidated by the husband and his family.

The institution of dowry began in India largely because, under Hindu law, parental property was not allowed to be shared by female children. In compensation, parents would give their daughter a gift at the time of her marriage. In time, bridegrooms and their families made handing over the gift as dowry an institutionalized demand.

Now according to a government report issued in 1981, there has been a "revolution in expectations" among younger Indians who live for "the here and now," who covet a middle-class way of life but whose incomes do not allow them to achieve it. Dowry has become a means of bridging the gap.

Women's rights groups charge, however, that avarice has led some men to marry, collect the wife's dowry, kill her when no more money is forthcoming, and then marry again.

All this has stirred debate at a time when, some feminist leaders believe, progress in women's rights has eroded, as even more women have become educated and financially independent.

Women's rights leaders point to international conventions were operative only in the organized sector of the economy, which accommodated only the minority of women workers.

The remaining 94 percent were in the informal sector, with no protection against exploitation. Even within the organized sector, the oldest and the largest industries — textiles, jute, and coal mines — displayed marked reductions in the number and proportion of women employees. Trade unions apparently made no exceptions. Dowry is prevalent in the public sector of the economy — the services and enterprises managed by the government — was there any improvement in women's employment, because the Constitution prohibits any discrimination between men and women by the State.

Understandably, the undervaluation of women's economic roles, and their exclusion from economic development policies, received the most attention from both researchers and planners. Various working groups have sought to devise better strategies to halt the economic marginalization of women. They identified five instruments: special working units or "cells" on women's development within the major economic ministries; Agriculture, Industry, Rural Development, and Labour and Employment; earmarking a share within sectoral allocations; grass root organizations of women — not as agencies to deliver services, but to empower women to collectively seek ways of improving their situation; and to exert their influence in development decisions; special agencies for women's development in all states to organize credit, training, and other support services; and reservation or affirmative action for women — not in jobs, but in all training activities.

OFFICIAL INERTIA

Acceptance of these prescriptions has been halting and ambivalent. Cells have been established only in the Union Ministries of Social Welfare, Rural Development, and Labour and Employment. Earmarking of sectoral allocations has not been accepted. The principle of women as a target of economic development programs has not been, by and large, accepted by top policymakers. The Sixth Five Year Plan, for the first time, contains a chapter on Women and Development, which admits failures to improve women's participation on various fronts and states that the goal of equality can only be realized through political independence, education, and family planning.

Directives have been issued to state governments that efforts to improve women's economic opportunities should be incorporated within all poverty reduction and employment generation programs, and a one-third quota for women has been introduced in the major training program for rural youth.

The response from implementing agencies, however, has been extremely slow and unimaginative. For the Government — besieged by problems of slowing growth rate, inflation and rising poverty — the issue of women's employment and development is not yet a priority. The connection between women's development and general economic development is yet to be realized. The only two sectors in which this connection has acquired some meaning are the anti-poverty programs, particularly in rural areas, and population policies.

These social development policies generally lack resources and competent and sensitive personnel. The sensitivity that has now developed in some of the senior levels of the bureaucracy declines steadily as one goes down the complex structure of government machinery. At the local — implementation — level, one meets the maximum lack of understanding and resistance.

The welfare approach — giving priority to education, health and child care, rather than empowering women — is politically easier, but the poverty of the women who need these services the most puts them out of reach.

WOMEN'S MOVEMENTS

How does one assess the new women's movement? What is its source, inspiration or perspective? The answers to these questions are not clear at the moment. The movement, though growing, does not present a unified clear trend in ideology, approach or objectives. The issues of dowry deaths and increasing trends in other crimes of violence against women has undoubtedly provided a strong impetus for the formation of new women's organizations, which are militant in challenging these trends. They have also forced some of the older women's organizations (which had, traditionally, their earlier militancy and settled down to welfare activities with grants from the government) to rethink their positions.

During the last four years some of the national women's organizations — old and new — of different political affiliations have joined hands in putting pressure on the government for stricter laws against these crimes, for better enforcement and reforms in the police establishments, and for greater attention to women's needs in the Five Year plans. This joint front has also begun a recurring campaign against dowry as an institution in educational institutions, urban neighbourhoods, and trade unions. As a result the antiodowry demonstrations in the large cities have often included a substantial section of men — students and trade unionists. These protests have exerted a noted influence on a section of the judiciary. Some of the more recent judgments, particularly of the Supreme Court that violation of women's rights have been extremely sharp and thought provoking. The press has attributed this to the impact of the women's movement.

While these urban organizations
have focused mainly on the issue of crimes against women, a new trend that has been spreading to different parts of the country is the birth of new organizations of poor women fighting for their economic rights. The involvement of a few dedicated young and highly educated women in their full-time staff, and research on these organizations have contributed greatly to the women and development debate. Knowledge about poor women's issues, the implications of development policy and laws in agriculture, forestry, industrialization, science and technology and other fields is still weak in most women's organizations. Promoting the growth of such understanding through increasing interaction between researchers and activists will be a long process. If the process can be extended to the educational system as a whole then development will certainly be accelerated and its effects can radically transform the future for women in India.

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Labour regulations are very limited, and often unknown and disregarded. There are no limits to the workday, particularly for live-in servants, and wages are below the legal minimum. Part of the wages are paid in kind and the rest in money. The increase in the cost of living and the broad economic responsibilities that these servants have to their children and relatives place them among the poorest of the poor.

Domestic service shows the highest percentage of employed women of any type of labour, to such a point that it has been called the work of the "fourth world." In Chile and Argentina, for example, the figure reaches 21 percent employed women, and increases further if one takes into account only the economically "active" urban female population. Rates of domestic service reach 27 percent among women in the Dominican Republic and 37 percent in Colombia.

The increase is even larger if one considers the share of domestic service in female employment in the service industries such as restaurants, laundries, etc. The percentage in this area is close to or about 50 percent. More significant, perhaps, is that these rates were obtained as early as 1960.

Consequently, it cannot be claimed that the high percentage of women in domestic service results from the recent economic changes. Domestic service in Latin America has a long history, and is rooted in the region, although they have served to perpetuate this state of affairs.

In most of these countries, the process of urbanization in the 1960s and 1970s was the result of a migratory flow from the countryside to the cities, carrying along with it hundreds of young women lacking any specific training to enable them to participate in the urban labour structure. But neither did the process of industrialization generate enough alternative employment to absorb this large supply of labour. Most of the women were absorbed by domestic service.

Is it the case then, that domestic service in Latin America is a transitory and temporary occupation, resulting from urban industrial maladjustment? Will it disappear as the various countries of the region modernize and this labour force finds its way into more productive sectors? That is certainly the hope of domestic servants. However, the reality is that there are no clear signs of development in Latin America is headed in that direction.

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