

Women, Work, and Welfare in India – A Situational Analysis

Dr. V. Basil Hans¹

Abstract

Women have crossed the thresholds of homes. From homes and farms to newer orbits of offices and skies and cyberspace they are engaged and their performance gauged. This paper examines space and role for women as workers. It also discusses about avenues of growth and welfare. It calls for tasks to remove problems in enabling women in work and welfare.

Keywords: Gender, empowerment, welfare, women, work

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I. INTRODUCTION

Women-centric issues are increasingly getting attention by academia and activists both in global developmental perspective and local development initiatives. This is more so in the post globalisation era that also coincides with path-breaking research and policy action germinating from development economics that gave us new concepts like ‘human development’ ‘women empowerment’, ‘gender equity’ etc., albeit as innovations, not inventions. Also enter watchwords like gender justice and women’s participation. One of the ways of studying divergence between economic growth and human development is to examine the socio-economic status of women. Conventionally issues of feminist and gender structures and status were confined to familial forms and functions – as in the case of women subjugation in a patriarchal society – or at the most their troubles and tribulations as workers in the unorganised sector. Naturally what was discussed most was the inferior economic position of housewives (now called homemakers) as unaccounted in national income accounting and their silent misery at homes (unabated domestic violence). But today the situation is different. Women have crossed the thresholds of homes. From homes and farms to newer orbits of offices and skies and cyberspace they are engaged and their performance gauged. Women empowerment and development now has a broader canvas. From freedom and security to officialdom, from identity to recognition, from capacity building to entitlements, and from family fixed-effect estimators to intrinsic and exogenous value added specifications, the role and contributions of women have expanded phenomenally. They are able to create their own avenues of growth and welfare. From pastoral society to contemporary information and global society, the role of women has changed drastically. Therefore, today we need to analyse the situation of working women in organised and unorganised sectors by organising the study along the twin axis of gender and labour, and gender and welfare. In other words, while we examine the welfare-to-work programmes we need to address issues of both gender and labour. Such an approach helps us understand better the issues of women work and welfare in human rights perspective. For India, with emerging socio-political reforms for empowerment of women, this has far reaching implications new research and policies. Perhaps the time has come do away with the concept of missing women.

II. FEMINISM, WORK AND WELFARE – CONCEPTS AND CONCERNS

Women’s movement has no beginning or origin’ and, that apart, one cannot compartmentalise the movement into isolated divisions and phases. But feminist movement has grown. From liberation to equity and to empowerment, much water has flown in River Ganga. The world is changing. The role of woman has changed a lot. Modern woman has realised her values.

It is quite interesting to study feminism in relation to welfare as women have moved from private space to public space. In the developed countries like the US more than 90 per cent of the adult care recipients are women. But that is not the case with developing countries. They are among the most deprived lot. Democracy and decentralisation in power structures have been more symbolic and sketchy, neither specific nor stretching. Grassroots reforms at Panchayat levels, for instance show how far-fetched real democracy is. ‘Women as doers of what men dictate’ is what this researcher saw in some of the field visits during his PhD study on infrastructure for rural development. We want democracy not a wanton one. Not that tantamount to what Carole Pateman in her critique of modern polity says, “for feminists democracy has never existed, as liberal society is

¹ Associate Professor & Head, Dept. of Economics, St Aloysius Evening College, Mangalore – 575 003, Karnataka, INDIA. Email: vbasilhans@yahoo.com.

regarded ‘as a series of male clubs’”. Isn’t this a dilemma in women and citizenship? Are women (still) second class citizens? I am reminded of what Olympe de Gouges said at the Paris Commune in 1793: “if a woman has the right to ascend the scaffold, she must also have the right to ascend the rostrum”. Why the dichotomy? This is a challenge to universal and enlightened citizenship. We need a feminist revision of the public private frame, a socio-economic and politico-legal transformation that question the dichotomy and attempts that relate women’s issue to only ‘sex’ and not ‘gender’, every day. The potential of the individual as well of the collective agency for transformation need not be underestimated. We only need appropriate strategies to deal with the existing social conditions and relations which are indeed poly-dimensional and multi-layered.

In India the feminist movement is weak (or a non-starter?). The history of feminism in India is regarded as mainly a practical effort and very limited in scope. Compared to some other countries, there has been only sparse theoretical writing on feminism in India. Some efforts at emancipation of women were confined to free them from socio-cultural exploitation and retrogressive practices like Sati. Very little attempt at economic organisation is recorded. Indian feminist scholars and activists have to struggle to carve a separate identity for feminism in India. They define feminism in time and space to in order to avoid the phenomenon of “uncritically following Western ideas”. Indian women negotiate survival through an array of oppressive patriarchal family structures: age, ordinal status, and relationship to men through family of origin, marriage and procreation as well as patriarchal attributes – dowry, siring sons etc. – kinship, caste, community, village, market and the state. The male and female dichotomy of polar opposites with the former oppressing the latter at all times is refuted in the Indian context because it was men who initiated social reform movements against various social evils. Patriarchy is just one of the hierarchies. Relational hierarchies between women within the same family are more adverse. Here women are pitted against one another. Not all women are powerless at all times. Caste-community identities intensify all other hierarchies.

Women make up 50per cent of the world's population, comprise 33.3per cent of the official labour force, perform nearly 66.6per cent of all working hours, receive 10per cent of the world's income but own less than 1per cent of world property. 85per cent of women workers are still sediment in the unorganized sector where the legal measures have no meaning for them. The plight of Indian women continues to be a matter of concern. What the Constitution proclaims for women, the reality springs up by opposing the very tenets, principles, ideals of the Constitution. It is side that a siege has been laid on women. They have been captured by the very institutions which attempt to safeguard and protect their lives and interests namely family, marriage, educational institutions, employment establishments, political mega-structures, policing outfits, legal machinery etc.

In general in the uneducated and rural section of the Indian society, which forms a major percentage of the total population, women are seen as economic burdens. Their contributions to productivity are mostly invisible as their familial and domestic contributions are unfairly overlooked. Indian women were contributing nearly 36 percent of total employment in agriculture and related activities, nearly 19 percent in the service sector, and nearly 12.5 in the industry sector as of the year 2000. The unfortunate reality is that the high illiteracy rate among women confines them to lower paying, unskilled jobs with less job security than men. Even in agricultural jobs where the work of men and women are highly similar, women are still more likely to be paid less for the same amount and type of work as men. However, in the urban section of the Indian society, women are empowered with laws such as IPC 498a which are heavily biased against the men in the society. Educated women are often accused of using such laws, to unleash legal terrorism on husbands by disgruntled wives.

III. WOMEN EMPOWERMENT

Women’s empowerment is a new phrase in the vocabulary of gender literature, a phrase used in two broad senses i.e. general and specific. In a general sense, it refers to empowering women to be self-dependent by providing them access to all the freedoms and opportunities, which they were denied in the past only because of their being ‘women’. In a specific sense, women empowerment refers to enhancing their position in the power structure of the society. The word women empowerment essentially means that the women have the power or capacity to regulate their day- to- day lives in the social, political and economic terms -a power which enables them to move from the periphery to the centre stage.

For a country that is presumed to tomorrow’s superpower what is the present state of manpower and woman power? Empowerment of the women is the straight answer to many ills. For sustainable development of India with about 50 per cent of population females, it is very important to realise that many factors contribute to this growth. In fact, women contribute to a portion of this achievement. In today’s scenario, we must remember that any scheme for development or improvement will not be complete unless we ensure that the benefit percolate to the women. Empowered women can change things for the better.

Development policy and planning in recent times – globally and nationally – have seen two paradigms converging, “women empowerment” and “inclusive growth”. The beneficiary has been economic development,

becoming comprehensive and quantifiable, to a large extent. Women in general and rural women in particular are being proactive in a process of ‘enabling’ for overcoming ‘exclusion’. However, several problems persist. The typical female biological advantage is not found in other spheres such as education, health and occupation. India’s report card on gender equality cuts a sorry figure. Out of the 155 countries with both HDI and GDI values, 138 countries have a better ratio than India’s (Human Development Report, 2009). We need to enhance their position in the power structure of the society so that their voice could be heard in all circles of decision-making and not merely in their homes. Total security for women is the need of the hour. This goes beyond removing socio-cultural barriers and providing necessary safeguards against social victimisation. In this juncture it is necessary to examine the present position of women in India in their multiple roles and responsibilities in the globalisation era, keeping in view the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

I argue for making on the one hand, the existing socio-economic and politico-legal structure accessible to the marginalised women, and on the other, creating new and more avenues for enhancing women’s participation and productivity for meaningful and purposive development, i.e. inclusive development. As structural transformation goes on both at a macro level and at a micro level gender issues have started getting more and more attention. The society now considers women empowerment as the means to an end. Gender equity and empowerment has meant enabling women, not simply ‘tolerating’ them but allowing them use their potential/power more effectively for the good of the society besides the good of the family and self. Both at the household level and the external level (world) it not merely emancipates women from the low status – subject to denial, oppression and inequality – but also elevates them socially, culturally, psychologically, ethically, and spiritually to higher planes of actualisation with valued identity, opportunity and peaceful coexistence with men.

IV. WOMEN IN THE ECONOMIC SPHERE

Women play a very important role in economic growth and development, yet they are discriminated against in economic life. For a very long time women were considered economically dependent – on parents, husband and children or the caregivers (public or private). Even when their welfare was discussed it was more conceptual than practical. They were the invisibles in the economy – silent and submissive. Male domination was natural. Women were suppressed under custom and law. They never enjoyed equality with men. They were almost like goods and money ever circling/circulating only sometimes getting to ‘sit’ (quietly?) in the name of ‘reservation. Desires and directions, capacities and opportunities never reconciled when there was nothing fair in workfare. They became an underclass labour that is essentially trapped in jobs that pay well below the minimum wage. With the implementation reforms under globalisation, business interest has framed the state’s agenda. Hence, an expanding welfare state is not in the interest of business. In a feminist analysis of globalisation, therefore, women, work, and welfare is more crucial than ever. Work did not make them rich. They are experiencing what is now termed as “feminisation of poverty”.

The so-called weaker sex is now facing new challenges like harassment in workplaces, role conflicts, disparity in modernisation etc. For instance, women in modern sector have complained about their managers being reluctant to empower women with modern tools. In most other cases women themselves are lag behind and go for complacency. Amartya Sen points out to gender discrimination through the way of professional incompetency. Not only in terms of employment but also regarding promotion in work, they often face handicap than men.

Even in a liberal and pro-growth environment one gets a feeling that women have been socialised to hold a subservient position in the society, and that they have been conditioned to see their existence as an extension of the males around them. It is not surprising, therefore that even in many women-headed, women-working (outside) households women are vulnerable. They may have the power to reside but not empowered to decide. From the survival of the fittest, a cultured society needs to strive for survival of the weakest.

V. ORGANISATIONAL INTERVENTIONS, POLICY ISSUES AND IMPLICATIONS

One chosen path realised by women for self-reliance is self-employment. In the IRDP and TRYSEM days it was most popular. It went through reformulations through the 1990-2000 period and culminated into a conscious collective and collaborative intervention in the form for self-help groups (SHGs), particularly in the field of (micro)-finance. The women SHGs are in the forefront of financial inclusion philosophy and practice in rural India, whereby a woman proves to be proactive for promoting herself, her sisters and brothers. The key values of the movement are *spandana* (responsive), *prerana* (inspiration) and *utthejana* (encouragement). The organisational efforts have resulted in elevating women as women as an investor, promoter, organiser, manager, coordinator and also a capitalist. Women entrepreneurship is now more of a holistic concept than ever before. The success of NGOs like Mysore Resettlement and Development Agency (MYRADA) and Development of Women and Children in Rural Areas (DWRCA) program in group lending made the government to shift the strategy of women development and empowerment to group based approach. It has been found that women in particular stand to gain a lot from micro finance because it gives them an independent means of generating

wealth and becoming self-reliant. From being a state of marginalization or being peripheral they are now entrepreneurial. This has had its influence on the urban women too. The SHG movement in India in general and Karnataka in particular, has metamorphosed the rural economic scenario perceptibly. The Stree Shakthi Self-help Group Scheme has covered all the villages of Karnataka. In the DK district of the Karnataka improvement in the quality of life of the people along with an ecological concern is a distinct feature of the SHG movement. Hence modernism is not alienated from traditionalism in agricultural practices, industrial pursuits, surviving and holistic development. NABARD's Micro Enterprise Development Program (MEDP) is also largely successful.

As far as modern tools and avenues are concerned there is a positive trend in women's participation in e-learning and other ICT initiatives. The exceptional skills of women have revealed that women can do any work and reach any level. In the IT industry alone women comprises of 20% of the workforce. Women-oriented websites are some of the ideas that forward-thinking companies are now creating. Their businesses and brands have won the heart of the women by creating, delivering and sustaining value for them by harnessing the woman and power of the Internet. This is thinking out-of-the box because it is not just thinking women as yet another segment marketing that needs some painting or polishing or adding of some pastels. One of the examples, worth mentioning is that of the villages of Thiruvananthapuram in Kerala. Women Self Help Groups (SHGs) have made the best use of ICT through 'Kudumbasree', the state (Kerala) Government's poverty eradication project, jointly with NABARD. The Kudumbasree Project provides the key ICT inputs including training) in micro enterprises. Its achievements in financial inclusion have drawn international recognition. However, there needs to be more widespread and consistent efforts in these areas, and also a deeper investigation about the success stories. For instance, women entrepreneurs are known not only to reimburse loans swifter than men, but also to receive smaller loans. However, on average women have smaller-scope business projects and are poorer than men. A deeper investigation is thus required in order to assess the existence of gender discrimination in small-business lending. Elsewhere (e.g. England) women's organisation have taken up more social intermediation activities and technology and knowledge-sharing activities. Women's activities have become more holistic with home, office, natural environment integration. They are able to manage resources better, for the good health of the individual, family and the environment. India needs to go a long way in this direction, although it celebrated the "Women's Empowerment Year" in 2001, the year in which the National Policy for Empowerment of Women was also adopted. I therefore, call for the following tasks for as solutions to the existing problems.

- Creating a sound awareness and action orientation among all about gender issues
- Revitalising government machinery at all places where women approach for the demand of justice and services
- Having a well-tuned gender budget with increasing allocations
- Promoting women care organisations for collective work and protection of rights
- More research on women issues, particularly health and work
- Change in the mind-set of men (a recent study reveals that 68 per cent of men believe that women should tolerate domestic violence in order to keep them together, and 65 felt that women deserved to be beaten!)
- Putting an end to gender violence and injustice
- Preventing sexual harassment in workplaces with strict enforcement of legal provisions, even in the informal sector
- Integrating research and policy and programmes for woman and human development with multi-sectoral interventions and a human rights perspective
- Enhanced and enriching political participation by women
- Ensuring good governance

VI. CONCLUSION

Women constitute about 48 per cent of India's population (2001 Census) and about 90 per cent of the informal sector and yet their contribution to economic development is often unseen and unheard Invisible. Although they are very much a part of the process of economic development, they are getting adversely affected in the wake of the changing developmental paradigms, especially those of economic liberalisation and globalisation, besides their own sufferings of social backwardness. Therefore, they form a priority group requiring special attention of all. There may be policy shifts but there should not be shift in focus on gender development and justice. Many of the women's organisations are still weak on managerial expertise and organisational efficiency Women Enterprises should go beyond family and child welfare, from reproductive roles to productive roles; from pap pad-pickle-perfume making syndrome to techno-training and services, skill textures and medium and large enterprises. Indeed there are still many issues unresolved: domestic violence and challenges: taking inclusive growth to the next orbit: technology+human approaches; financial+social intermediation. Poverty is not only income poverty; it is also capacity poverty, opportunity poverty and accessibility poverty. To remove feminisation, inclusive growth must consider poverty in all its dimensions and directions. Wives need to be really 'better' halves. One needs to look behind and beyond the times.

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