

Women and Work in India: The International Dimension

In an imaginative series of posters, photographs and paintings in 1985 in New Delhi, Women's Work was portrayed as if the "Strategies of Survival" were the sum total of their lives. A reflection of this experience is found in the following passage:

A woman returning home from work. On her modestly covered head is her work basket - a metal container dented by the heavy loads she carries all day. Her load of stones is gone now - in it are the reminders of the chores awaiting her at home: some stray twigs and splinters, a brass water pot.

Opposite her is a lady lawyer, her white collar freshly starched, poring over her thick gold-embossed books.

A young woman seated at the controls of an aircraft, smiling, competent.

Women bending down, transplanting rice, under the watchful eyes of a man.

And a policewoman, in her crisp, masculine uniform, exercising her authority over half-a-dozen cowering truck drivers.

A scientist peering into her test tubes.

And an impoverished craftswoman, squatting in a dark corner, painstakingly filling in the colours of her remunerative folk painting.¹

The author concludes that, "the impressions blend producing a diffuse but pleasurable sensation of progress, of giant strides in development, measured by predictable parameters: a woman Prime Minister, women doctors, technicians, sports women ...".

These are word pictures. But if we were to assemble on one shelf the writings, the research results, the surveys, the plans and the programmes on Indian women, one dominant theme will emerge: pushing others on to the edge. And that continues to be the centre-stage position of employment in the development debate during the UN Decade for Women. The core questions in this debate were the definition of work, the quantification of women's labour and the evaluation of their economic rewards. From the reading of current literature, it would be appropriate to conclude that the perceptions of women's

work at different levels in the local, national and international space have pushed the frontiers of knowledge. Surreptitiously, invisible doors have begun to be opened: Ideas are now crystallizing on their real economic contribution to society leaving behind long-established traditions, immutable customs and century-old beliefs. The social dimension of this significant shift has yet to be analysed in depth: several shades of this complexity are intermingled, like the colours of a rainbow; which softly get blurred and then lost.

This paper makes a modest attempt to link the struggles of a woman worker for survival (economic quality and social equity) in an international perspective. The present predicament of an Indian woman is a part of a historical transition towards an alternative development model which will liberate the energies of both men and women to build a new society where being a woman is to be completely human. What then are the threads that link women and work in India to the international scene?

Women in development: The connection

The history of debates about development in national and international fora demonstrates that serious and concrete discussions rarely touch on women's issues in politics, economy or society. This omission or neglect is not clearly connected with their real political, economic and social contribution, which is just beginning to be reflected in some national development plans, policies and programmes. What is the place of women in the discussions on national development and how is their contribution related to international decisions? During the last three decades, the terminology (or the words) with which we describe "women and development" has become unrecognisable as the women's movement at the grass-roots level has grown and become an international phenomenon, as witnessed in Nairobi both at the UN World Conference and the NGO Forum in July 1985. It has pushed aside the earlier legacy of ideas and notions which curtailed off the hidden assets and human resource potential of women. The transformation of terminology is linked to the "development debate" itself on how to eliminate "poverty" and inequalities among the rich and the poor countries. The fact that "development" was added to women's questions has had a profound influence on the nature of the debate, which after Nairobi will not be conducted within the same parameters. A brief historical glance illustrates this point.

In 1951, in the reports and studies of the UN system, the then dependent and colonised countries, mostly poor, were placed in one general category entitled the "backward nations". Women were not in the picture then. In the 1960s, the term "backward" began to be

replaced by "under-developed", defined in various ways, the world being neatly classified into the rich "developed" and the poor "developing" parts. Since then, the shifts in the world economy and the emergence of the Third World as a group of countries with common problems has given the social scientists a new problem. Different categories such as "pre-industrialised" countries", "industrialised countries" or "newly industrialised countries" came into vogue. More recently, during the 1980s, the rich countries are simply referred to as the "North" - representing some 38 countries - the poor countries as the "South" - covering about 120 countries. "Women and development" as a subject entered on the international stage around 1970, when the "hidden" economic and social contribution of women began to be uncovered from under layers of social mythology. The Declaration of the International Year of the Woman by the United Nations General Assembly in 1975 could be considered a turning point in the history of current notions on the place, role and position of women in society at the international level. Within a decade since then, recognition that half of humanity in every country is connected with development questions became apparent. And now a new economic and social reality, and with that women's own perceptions on what are the social, political and economic issues, has become an agenda item - still not on the top list of priorities.

Although there are only a few "enlightened enclaves" where awareness of equality of rights has made a dent in traditional thinking, a new "connection" that development and women go hand in hand has already come to the surface slowly and imperceptibly. The notion that there can be no development without women is making inroads into the briefs of the policy makers and "scoops" of the media. Women form a mosaic without which no pattern of development could be understood in totality. The basic fact is that women are the major food producers and food providers, but mostly remain hungry. In most modern economies women either work with muscle power or with machines that increase their workload. They are not yet fully involved in decision making or decision taking on all matters of survival: basic needs or disarmament - the two essential problems of the century. Some questions are pertinent: where do women fit in this range of issues concerning the survival of the family (their day-to-day lives) and of humanity threatened with destruction? In what way is the daily life of women influenced in rich and poor countries by decisions taken at the international level? In what way can women's voices be heard in the international assemblies which debate development and disarmament? In what way can women's initiatives be merged into a movement

for their emancipation and self-reliance? How should we start making the connection between women and international issues?

Work, Employment and Planning

Women's work in India, like women's work anywhere in Asia or any other part of the Third World, is related to and tied to land, and deprivation of resources. The majority whether in rural areas or urban surroundings do not receive the full benefits of their hard labour. It is now slowly being recognised that the totality of their output should be counted and accounted for in the refined processes of collation and tabulation; so that it is given an appropriate place in national accounts which signal economic images of a country. This omission or lack of recognition has direct consequences on the status of women. Their performance is considered of no or low economic value and completely underrated socially. The complex problem, however, is how to separate labour, work, employment, job from the totality of a woman's life-cycle in order to give it mathematical numbers and values. These are all tangled in a chain of cause and effect, where categories lose their original meaning. A working woman is like a Hindu Goddess with one thousand arms with which she must perform a myriad of miracles. The big difference, however, is that she is not placed on a pedestal and worshipped. But instead she is continually punished with hard labour and a weak body, looking upon her diminishing income with hungry eyes, bent with the burden of a value system which does not encourage her to look at the sky.

The outline above is sketchy without adding to it a few brushstrokes indicating the reproductive role of a woman. That role is moulded on three elements: perpetual pregnancies, chronic anaemia and permanent fatigue. Equipped with these, it is not surprising that the infant mortality and maternal mortality rates continue to be higher compared to other countries in South East Asia such as Thailand, Korea and Sri Lanka.

There are several problems of quantifying the number of women in the labour force in India. One of the major difficulties has been the definition of "worker" particularly in agricultural censuses and surveys. There are several other technical problems of underreporting the range of women's work in agriculture and the failure on the part of investigators to record women's activities described as "macro-economic". The second problem is the question of an adequate methodology to calculate the unemployment rates of women. According to a publication of the Planning Commission, female unemployment rates are higher than the male rates both on the weekly and the daily status basis. But the chronic unemployment rates of women are lower —

which means that a lower proportion of women are in the labour market for regular full-time employment. It has been suggested by various authors that the primary need of the majority of women is part-time employment or employment in certain parts of the year. But this suggestion completely ignores the fact that part-time employment does not offer any security of income, stability of employment or protection in labour legislation.

How did the planners visualise the range of women's work and their human potential translated in terms of job opportunities? For reasons not yet fully analysed successive five-year development plans since independence, have incorporated targets on "manpower" planning under which title women were expected to be included. The sixth five-year development plan (1980-85), for the first time, gave some policy direction on employment for women stating clearly that the "labour market as it is operating is not neutral as between men and women". Recognising that "one of the most important means" of achieving an improvement in the status of women is to increase their employment opportunities, it was estimated that at the end of the planned period the total number of women in the work force will be approximately 100 million. Half of this number are at present working in non-agriculture described as non-farm sectors of the economy. Promotion of employment was seen in the Plan only in "women-preferred jobs, such as office work and in the textile, chemical and electronic industries.

According to the Plan, the role and potential of women in the rural areas has not been adequately assessed and appreciated. Since rural women work in ways which have neither been quantified nor completely captured for analysis, "the gains in productivity and production as well as reduction of losses is expected to be substantial".

The Plan also points out that *laissez-faire* in the labour market has discriminated against women in "some parts" of the country. They have lost traditional occupations as a result of changes which have transferred productive capacity from homes and cottages to factories and machines. Conscious and unconscious biases of employers operate against their recruitment in various occupations. The power structure in traditional families and communities prevent them from seeking and obtaining adequate education and outside employment and thereby securing an independent income and status.

To improve the situation, the Plan recommended a comprehensive policy for women's employment consisting of expansion and diversification of education and training opportunities available to women with elimination of bias about "suitability" of type of courses, and

special steps for the admission of women to all educational and training programmes on a strictly non-discriminatory basis.

Since 1980, however, the situation has been rapidly changing as noted in the case of women graduates who are being absorbed in certain jobs in the organised sector while in certain rural areas such as Maharashtra where employment guarantee schemes were introduced rural women were employed in various phases of construction work. The central problem is that those industries and occupations which were identified as "women-preferred", investments both in the public and private sectors have not increased.

In reality, however, some jobs were created in the services sector. In India, while many jobs were lost in the organized or modern sector of the economy this matches the analysis of global data which is unidimensional - that irrespective of the economic or geographic region of the world, women have generally found more and more jobs in the tertiary sector of their economies. This broad economic indicator also includes India where since 1980, there has been a perceptible increase in women workers so that they now outnumber men workers in occupations such as clerical and related work, education, textiles, catering and commerce sectors. What has been observed in some Indian states such as Gujarat, Maharashtra and Kerala is that at a certain stage of industrialization and development of the tertiary sector women's job opportunities increase. This shift usually means that younger women in the age group of 18-25 slowly and imperceptibly leave the "hidden", "unrecorded" and "non-monetary" economy and join the "services" for uncertain incomes and unstable employment contracts.

Several studies in India show that the analysis of women's work is related to socio-economic class. But there are many questions which go beyond income class and social strata and influence the employment market. Some illustrations below point to the several immobilities of women in India.

During the United Nations Decade for Women, several attempts were made to implement existing legislation and to introduce new provisions to enhance the status of women, for example, the Anti-Dowry Act (1984) and the Anti-Cruelty Act (1983). According to the former, to take or give a dowry on marriage is subject to fine and imprisonment. It is too early to examine the impact of these on women's work - but it appears that in several urban centres women who are privileged to get a job are now saving their incomes in preparation for marriage and dowry. Thus, the financial burden has, in some cases, shifted from the father or male member of the family to the woman herself. There is a definite fear in the mind of a young

woman that unless she is financially able to provide a dowry, she will remain unmarried, which will be a big stigma on her status, influencing her life like a chronic malady. Does the fact that she contributes income towards upgrading the standard of living of the entire family by acquiring an employment status, enhance her power within the household?

Irrespective of income, caste, hierarchy or religious belief, the birth of a girl in most parts of India is still greeted with a sense of loss. Throughout different stages of her life, she is considered to be a monetary liability despite the fact that most girls start working in the house or on the farm or on casual jobs from about the age of 7. A girl is still a child when she is given the responsibility of a grown woman. Thus, often she does not enjoy the carefree phases of childhood. She skips the stages of innocence and adolescence straight into womanhood.

A UNICEF workshop recently revealed the startling fact that in Bombay, according to a survey (1984), out of 8,000 abortions following pre-natal sex determination, 7,999 were female. Why one male foetus was destroyed is not clear. The recommendation of the workshop was to request the Medical Council of India and the Ministry of Health to institute a mechanism which would prevent certain medical tests from being used to determine sex and for other non-medical reasons. Meanwhile, millions of girls at birth face a question mark in their lives and will go through various stages of their life cycle being unwanted and pushed around.

Achieving puberty is the most fearful and dangerous stage. Basically it means that she is of "marriageable" age and could be subjected to a series of restrictions particularly on her physical movements. Jumping, playing, laughing are actions which are studied, controlled and suppressed. The major test for which she is being prepared is to prove to the family and society at large on the first night of marriage that she is "pure". How many tragedies are played out on that first night in Indian homes, one will never know! Also lack of information on sexual matters (education is a big word) takes a girl through a series of shocks as in horror film. A man's education as to how to treat a woman, physically or psychologically, has been equally neglected on the basis that he "knows all". How many "impure" newly wedded brides are returned home to their parents like "rejected parcels" has, of course, never been quantified. Add to this other unexplained reasons for "rejecting" a woman even after several years of marriage if she does not reproduce a male. These "rejections" multiplied often lead simply to destitution, and in a minority of cases prostitution. This is a malaise imposed by society on women.

The equality concept

There are many definitions of "equality"² including a simple mathematical one which implies accounting for the number of women in different occupations compared to men. These numbers continue to indicate that access to education, vocational and technical training is not only unequal but in most cases non-existent. Women continue to be hired and trained mostly in "women's subjects" as defined by tradition rather than curricula.

There are, however, two aspects of equality (inequality) which are striking: discrimination in recruitment practices and unequal remuneration for work of equal value. Overt discrimination prior to entry into the labour force particularly in occupations or industries (scientific, technical and mechanical jobs) which are considered to be traditionally "male dominated" is the general rule rather than the exception. In other words, a woman is often rejected because of the social mythology that she will be frequently absent from work, is not usually responsible, cannot carry out certain heavy assignments and will cost more to the employer when she becomes a mother. Normally, this cost is conceived at a different level and not related to the low wages paid to women—in other words the rationale that women are hired precisely because the labour costs are low is usually not taken into account. Here the main point is completely missed and that is the social contribution of women's reproduction and the well being of future generations which forms human capital and has a higher value in both monetary and social trust. Why employers prefer males has been a subject of investigation. The results show that preselection bias and inherited prejudices determine recently the flow in the channels: the green and the red. Women are thrown out of the labour market, or dumped in "feminine" jobs, where human energy rather than machines predominate.

On unequal pay, one of the most blatant forms of discrimination against women continues to be unequal remuneration for work of equal value despite recent legislation in the Equal Remuneration Act adopted in February 1976. A recent analysis of available data from 16 occupations indicates that despite its adoption the gap between men and women's wages has not narrowed during the decade. There are several explanations of this phenomenon: the hidden point is that women are graded in occupations to which low pay is attached and their jobs are classified and evaluated on ad-hoc criteria.

The equity principle

The Nairobi Conference, in adopting the Forward-Looking Strategies, took an important step towards recognising that all women's issues are human issues and therefore inextricably linked to the political framework. There was a general response in considering work as a development question as many policy statements showed, but empiric evidence, statistical analysis or simple logic has not yet been applied to considering the interrelationships of the non-monetary part of the economy to which women contribute in substantial terms. In the post-Nairobi phase, up to the year 2000, a new set of questions is emerging which will have to take into account the central problem of discrimination against women (as defined in the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women) in order to take concrete steps towards equality (the other side of the coin). The linking of women's issues with other socio-economic concerns has occurred at a time when the social upheavals are questioning political structures. The general protest against these structures has highlighted economic and social inequalities not only between the North and the South, among the social groups, within a country, but also between men and women.

The present system of international division of labour left to itself would continue to sharpen national inequalities of the vast majority who are classified in low-income groups. The cultural dimensions often missed are the extent and degree to which women's work and ability is adversely affected by a development model which fails to take their human potential resources into account. The significant point to retain is that among the low and lower income groups in all countries including India the poorest, irrespective of the definition and methodology, happen to be women. We are living in a society where economic value is attached to all goods and services which ultimately determine social use or exchange value. Women are constantly confronted with non-choices in the family, in the labour market and in society. In order to realise the tremendous human potential of women in India it is essential that a new accommodation, adjustment and arrangement is made to all levels in economy and society without which development will be partial, distorted and unreal.

International Dimensions

In the present crisis of the world system in which inequalities have increased among and within nations as well as among different social groups and households, it is timely to work towards seeking an alternative division of development. While heightened political tensions

and increasing inequalities influence the whole of the population in many countries, women are more acutely and directly affected. They themselves need to take an active role in defining development priorities and outlining the parameters of a new society. Towards this effort, the areas of action and research that need to be closely examined are the following:

- in order to improve the position of women as food producers, their customary rights to land need to be linked to agrarian structures, policies and legislation;
- to compensate for the loss of income from subsistence agriculture, crafts and trading, new avenues for employment creation must be urgently found so that there is no further decline in the already low standards of living of rural and urban women;
- where women are industrial workers suffering higher rates of job losses and unemployment compared with men, trade unions must be trained to include equality policies at all stages including collective negotiation and bargaining;
- in development concepts, the cultural dimension should be analysed without bias and imposition of the value system of one or other culture, taking into account that women are custodians of culture in their primary role as educators of the new generation;
- at the local and household level, wherever the existing social structures and the division of labour between men and women are unequal or oppressive, women's associations, groups and organisations should actively participate in the processes of social change; and
- the women's movement in the North and South needs to be strengthened to overcome the artificial divisions and boundaries created by geography, economy and ideology.

NOTES

1. Sheela Reddy: "Women's World: The queen and the peasant", in *Mainstream* (New Delhi), Vol. XXIV, No. 19, 11 Jan. 1986.
2. Legal equality, according to Article 16, is defined thus: "No citizen shall, on grounds only of religion, race, caste, sex, descent, place of birth, residence or any of them, be eligible for, or discriminated against in respect of, any employment or office under the state."