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WOMEN'S MULTIPLE ROLES: THE NEED FOR SOCIAL INFRASTRUCTURE

KEY WORDS:

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

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

Much of the maintenance of such households, whether it is basic needs like water, fuel, food and care is provided by women. Further in most households women attempt to bring in some where with all, whether it is monetary or in kind. In deeply distressed situations like famine, when the drought hits areas that are farmlands, and the households do not of foods it is women who will dig up roots, pick berries and find ways of feeding the household.

This point about women's critical role in the survival of families, communities and society is a crucial premise on which to build, what can be called, social support policy. Nobel laureate Amartya Sen has this to say –

“We need a vision of mankind not as patients whose interests have to be looked after, but as agents who can do effective things both individually and jointly. We also have to go beyond the role of human beings specifically as consumers or as people with needs and consider more broadly, their general role as agents of change who can give the opportunity think, assess, evaluate, resolve, inspire, agitate and through these means, reshape the world”.

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

Currently, there is a strong well documented demand worldwide that women's role of caring for children and the

aged, and house work should be not only recognized but monetized in order to ensure that the time they spend on this, which often is almost all the time, is rewarded monetarily. The fact that they do this kind of work for a large part of the day deprives them of the opportunity to go out and earn a wage as men do, hence the recognition is crucial.

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

Data collection on both individual as well as households needs to be improved dramatically. Data collection systems have tended to see man as the principal bread winner of every household and women as supplementary bread winners or only dependents. However, studies done both in India and abroad, not only use time but also the economic contribution of women, even if it is non-monetized, have revealed that women especially amongst the landless and the poor households contribute as much, if not more, to both economic and social output than men. Hence, improved collection of data is critical for the understanding as well as policy response to women.

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

Renana Jhabvala in her study also echoes the same – “Women often remain invisible and unrecognized as workers, both because they are women and because work in the informal economy is often hidden. The work and contributions of women to the economy, as well as in the family and community, are persistently undervalued, particularly when women are home-based workers, paid domestic or care workers, or unpaid contributing workers in family businesses or on family farms. Focusing on their role as workers rather than homemakers or childcare providers serves to underscore the fact that women are economic agents who contribute to their households and the economy and therefore should be considered a target of economic as well as social policies”.

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

Soft Infrastructure would mean support services which are considered enabling for women in the poorest amongst the

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

Thus, a women from the weaker sections in the society and trapped in poverty, instead of leaving household work to her eldest daughter as it is often done in these households of having to walk miles to bring fuel and water, has access to it as a community building service. She can leave her child in the crèche, bake her chapattis in the common fuel source, wash her clothes and then go to work.

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

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

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17. BIMARU is an acronym formed from the first letters of the names of the states. It was coined by Ashish Bose in the mid-1980s. BIMARU has a resemblance to a Hindi word "Bimar" which means sick.