

The role of women in economic development



India, since independence in 1947 has followed a mixed economy where the public sector and the private sector co-existed. The public sector, till recently, dominated the core sectors of the economy viz. the heavy industries, power and infrastructure, banking and insurance, mining of major minerals etc. The market however also always played an important part subject to overall State regulation. Further, the economy, till recently, had an inward orientation as India pursued the goal of self-reliance and import substitution. The goal of establishing a socialistic pattern of society resulted in a system of bureaucratic controls over industry with elaborate licensing requirements and procedures, tariffs, foreign exchange regulations, import restriction, wide scale deficit financing etc.

Since 1991, India has embarked upon a course of restructuring its macro-economic policy framework. India is emerging as a major market, foreign investment is growing, the foreign to the eighties but it was the balance of payments crisis of 1991 that marked the decisive-turning. The new economic policies consist of macro-economic stabilization processes aimed at restoring greater fiscal discipline and efficiency, deregulation and de-licensing policies aimed at propelling industrial growth, and structural adjustment processes aimed at opening of the economy leading to greater competitiveness of Indian industry and greater infusion of foreign capital both in industry as well as in the capital markets. The sum total of these processes is to place greater reliance on the market with least controls, liberalise investment procedures and make the economy globally integrated. The process of liberalisation and de-regulation is now well under way and it has given significant fillip to the rate of economic growth. exchange reserves are high

and the rate of inflation under control. Foodgrains production has attained an all time high and the Indian middle class is growing in size. At the same time, these adjustment processes also hold out considerable challenges for the country, particularly for vulnerable groups, such as poor women, whose interests the market seldom reflects, whose contribution to the economy is generally invisible and often in then domestic sphere. The Government of India has, therefore, made special efforts to increase its support for social sectors and started a number of schemes aimed at the poor, particularly poor women and women in the informal sector.

In the past, data collection through the National Census has brought to light the under reporting of female population in certain parts of the country. However, it is also true that female work participation is not adequately recorded and consequently reflected in the Census Data. Declining sex ratio and low female work participation rates in many parts of the country are direct results of the lack of social and cultural sensitivity on gender issues, which very often is reflected in the bias against the importance, role and the status of women in the society.

UNIFEM the lead agency in mobilising the gender sensitising process for the National Census 2001 is working closely with the Registrar General of India. The focus is mainly in the area of training of the census enumerators with a view to improve the enumeration of women and girl children and creating public awareness through media mobilisation.

DEVELOPMENT OF WOMEN THROUGH FIVE YEAR PLANS

The approach to women's development in the First Five Year Plan (1951-56) was not clear. The women's question was perceived as primarily a social one by the major section of the political leadership and the bureaucracy and the role of the State in ' social issues was viewed with great hesitation and caution. Significantly, issues identified by the National Planning Committee's Sub-Committee on Women (" Women in a planned Economy" 1941) were not considered by the official planners till a decade later. Instead women were projected as beings in need of education, health and welfare services only. It was only between 1977 and 1980 that some serious exercises in policy review were taken up. Amongst these, the three most significant exercises were the Report of the Working Group on Employment of Women, 1977-78; Report of the Working Group on Development of Village Level Organizations of rural Women, 1977-78, Report of the Working Group on Adult Education Programmes for Women, 1977-78 and Report of the National Committees on the Role and Participation of Women in Agriculture and Rural Development, 1979-80. The Sixth Five Year Plan (1979-84) document released in December, 1979 Contained definite admission of failure to remove disparity and injustice in both social and economic life. It also stated that the objective of population control could not be achieved without bringing about major changes in the status of women. Including women within the chapters on employment, manpower and rural development this document made a definite departure from earlier plans where women had been mentioned only in the chapters on social services. In suggesting the need for " administrative innovation" and " collection of sex-wise distribution data on development

assistance”, the plan acknowledged the previous neglect, the need for better information flow and new mechanisms to ensure women receive their “ due share” of government’s attention and support and “ equal opportunity for growth and distributive justice”. Support for organizations of rural women was suggested on the same principles as organizations of the rural poor – to improve their “ bargaining power and access to development assistance”.

With the twin emphasis on employment and productivity in the Seventh Plan the Approach paper highlighted the strategy of a direct attack on the problems of poverty, unemployment and regional imbalance with “ accelerated development of human resources”. There was greater emphasis on the provision of gainful employment to the unemployed – particularly women and youth. The strategy of organizing women around socio-economic activities was reiterated, for the twin objectives of making their projects economically viable and adding to their social strength for overall development of their status.

The Eighth Plan was formulated against the backdrop of the New Economic policy which brought about a process of macro-economic stabilization and structural adjustment processes. The new features of the section on Women’s Development are a paragraph on violence against women and a two-page “ Situational Analysis” – which highlights the problems of higher mortality, lower education and increasing unemployment of women, “ the conceptual methodological and perception” biases regarding value of women’s work, compounded by women’s concentration in the informal sector, resulting in casualisation, non-protection of labour laws and

inaccessibility to credit, technology and other types of development assistance.

The Approach Paper to the Ninth Plan which was made public in January, 1997 marked other watershed in the history of Indian Planning. It declared the Empowerment of Women as one of the objectives of the Plan and the transfer of control of social infrastructure in the public sphere to women's groups as a strategy of the Plan. The Approach Paper calls for women's component plan as a part of the plan of each sector to identify the flow of benefits to and impact of plans and programmes on women. It calls for reliance on women's self help groups as a strategy. It declares the flow of benefits to women and children as one of the fundamental criteria for determination of allocation priorities. At the time of submission of this report, work on the preparations of the detailed Plan proposals is underway. A unique feature this time is the process of consultations in which hundreds of grass roots women's organizations are discussing the Approach Paper and formulating suggestions which would help realize the objective of women's empowerment laid down by the Approach Paper. These groups are interacting closely with the Planning Commission and the Ministries at the time of writing this report in an effort to engender the Ninth Plan. This process of mobilization and consultation is a continuation of the process that was started prior to the Beijing Conference.

The last quarter of a century has seen tremendous changes in education of women, in their health and in political participation, in laws governing them as well as in awareness of their rights. The impact of these changes are not glaringly visible yet in data on work participation rates or large-scale entry of

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women in modern sector employment or in decision making at high levels. However, rapidly growing enrolment and retention of women in school closing the gender gap, women having higher longevity of life than men, lowering of fertility rates and rapid extension in entry of women in local level elected bodies show steady and sure advancement of women following hand in hand with economic development of the country. With increase in rate of growth of the economy and in the above mentioned development/empowerment indicators for women, the 21st century is poised to be women's century. Whether economic development leads to women's development and empowerment or vice versa we do not know. But women's development and empowerment through education, change in their economic, social and political status will ensure sustainable development that we are sure off.

The scope of this paper is limited to the case study of Punjab. In the land that celebrates machoism and is notorious for the declining sex ratio, a record number of women participating in the growth of the economy. Women entrepreneurs do not operate in isolation. They work under the same macro, regulatory and institutional framework as their male counterparts. However, it is necessary to dig deeper in order to understand the gender biases embedded in society which limit women's mobility, interactions, active economic participation and access to business development services. The business environment for women also reflects the complex interplay of different factors that ultimately result in the disadvantaged status of women in society.