

A NOTE ON WOMEN AND PUBLIC POLICY

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In this note, I take up a few issues regarding women and public policy in India, selected on the basis of their prominence in the democratic women's movement in India.

EMPLOYMENT: Public policy tends to ignore women as workers and economic agents and views them mostly in their role in nurture and reproduction. The rapid economic growth witnessed till a few years ago tended initially to be jobless, and later pushed women into underpaid and unpaid employment under highly insecure and exploitative conditions like home based work under the putting out system or low income self employment or informal sector employment. Women's work in rural areas too was adversely affected by the agrarian crisis and non farm employment which had increased in the 1980s too fell. Most work for women is on short-term contracts and not permanent in very small units and in home-based production, at the lowest rung of an opaque and complex subcontracting production chain. Much of such work is extremely volatile due to its export-oriented character.

The MGNREGS with its special safeguard for women offered an opportunity to promote massive employment generation at decent wages in rural areas which could be extended to urban areas. However, the Government's decision to wreck its own programme (often under pressure from both official economists and the landlords) by keeping expenditure even below the tardy allocations by generating less employment, not paying minimum wages through exploitative piece rated calculations, delays in wage payment and restrictive list of permissible works (with a focus on asset creation and manual work) subverted its true potential.

The left and democratic women's movement in India has underlined the imperative to **promote women's economic independence, including employment which is remunerative and protected, and remove the unrelenting and escalating burden of poverty on women by addressing the underlying causes of poverty through the distribution and allocation of all resources.** It has argued that the government must resume and strengthen its role in employment generation, provision of infrastructure, social and economic services and social and legal protection through increased public investment and pro-people government spending policies. Massive public employment programmes that ensure the greatest participation of women workers would not only contribute to public provisioning of goods and services but also facilitate a shift from the dubious model of growth led employment generation to employment led growth generation.

NATURAL RESOURCES: Ensuring access to and regeneration of common property and other natural resources through equitable and sustainable development which will reduce drudgery is extremely important too. Mining (legal and illegal) has devastated entire landscapes, polluted water bodies and robbed people of their traditional livelihoods. The gendered impacts of displacement via infrastructural development like power and corporatization of water need special attention. The annexation of natural resources and common property through a renewed and more intense expropriation of these resources under neoliberal capitalist development through primitive accumulation and open loot and plunder affects women disproportionately given their primary responsibility to collect and manage these CPRs. **The dual processes of annexation and degradation (which have intensified under neoliberal capitalism) have meant that women have to spend longer hours or pay more for what were once easily accessible common property resources like fuel, fodder, water, non timber forest produce, etc. Preventing displacement and environmental degradation in the name of rapid growth, so as to use natural resources in a just, equitable and sustainable manner by giving greater**

priority to livelihoods of poor women and men over corporate profits and elite infrastructure projects is essential.

FEMINISATION OF AGRICULTURE: Increasingly, women are taking on a principle role in agriculture where their share of the workforce has increased even as the total number of cultivators and of male cultivators falls in a situation of falling agricultural viability due to trade liberalization, growing input costs and inadequate availability of infrastructure due to tightening of subsidies and fiscal effort in areas such as irrigation, power, extension services, credit, etc. This is especially true for the already neglected and backward rain-fed areas and hilly drylands, where they are heads of households of increasing numbers of small and marginal farms as cultivators (at present more than three-quarters of all cultivable land is under small and marginal holdings). According to the National Sample Survey Organisation (NSSO), 18% of farm families in India are headed by women. Adequate investment, cheap inputs, credit, technology and assured procurement are required to re-energise this sector. Its importance in ensuring food security and relieving women of the stress of household provisioning cannot be overemphasised. The proposed Mahila Kisan Sashaktikaran Pariyojana (MKSP) is designed as a part of NRLM, which is likely to reduce its importance. In addition, **all schemes for farmers must include a specific quota for women, for example, the Rashtriya Krishi Vikas Yojana (RKVY) and women cultivators must receive cheap inputs, credit with assured procurement through recognition of their status as cultivators and landowners on an as is where is basis without insistence on formal titles.**

PUBLIC SERVICES: Another crucial aim is to **ensure universal access to basic services like food, health, education, public transport, street and home lighting, water and sanitation, security, etc. This should not be done by shifting State responsibility to user cost or insurance based public-private partnerships, but through a sizeable increase in the public provisioning of basic goods and services through universal access of reasonable quality at affordable cost.** This also requires directing investment flows and infrastructure development to spatially disadvantaged locations where the disadvantages are concentrated. There is clear evidence of poor and worsening attainments in health and nutrition indicators of women and girls, with a widening gender gap in such indicators. This can only be reversed through a universal programme of food security and basic health services. The targeted insurance based models linked to PPP or purely private provisioning will increase, not decrease exclusions and raise user costs.

The most conspicuous form of gender discrimination is in the health sector where it is plainly noticeable in the low female-male sex ratio, high levels and female-male differentials in morbidity and mortality and differential access to treatment and care. The 0-6 child sex ratio has continued to decline from 927 to 914 as per Census 2011. It has now spread to other areas and is widespread even in central India, eastern regions, and states like Andhra Pradesh where this was not the case till a decade or so ago. Public expenditure on health in India is among the lowest in the world, both as a proportion of total expenditure on health care and as a percentage of GDP. Government expenditure on health care in India amounts to only 19.67 per cent of total expenditure while the remaining 71.13 per cent is spent by households themselves. Similarly, despite the huge gender gaps, there is an intent to bring in the private for-profit model into educational institutions. The stress on the PPP model for all levels of education runs counter to the RTE Act which has not been fully enforced. A central government minister recently admitted that there are more temples than toilets in India, and 60 percent of India's population and 70 percent of women don't have access to a toilet. The lack of access to toilets for girls and women is a cause of harassment, leaving them vulnerable to molestation, rape and other forms of sexual violence, more so in urban areas. The lack of access to toilets causes girls ages 12 to

18 to miss around five days of school per month, or around 50 school days per year, according to the 2011 Annual Status of Education Report. About 23 percent of girls drop out of school when they start menstruating.

PENSIONS: Old Age: Again, ageing has a gender dimension, that is, there is an increasing proportion of women in the older population, which is well-known and is a worldwide phenomenon, one of the reasons being that women's biology is such that they live longer than men. Even in India, where males outnumber females in total population, the sex ratio in the age-group 60+ is 1050 females per 1000 males in 2011.

Currently, persons above 60 years get a pension of just Rs 200 per month, and those over 80 years get Rs 500 per month under the Indira Gandhi National Old Age Pension Scheme (IGNOAPS). This too is restricted to persons Below the Poverty Line; which implies that only about one in every five persons over 60 years old receives old age pension. Further even after the supplementary budgetary spending by a few of the States, the amount paid as pension to elderly people ranges from a maximum of 1000 rupees per month in Goa and Delhi to a paltry 200 rupees per month in Bihar and Odisha. In the unorganised sector (comprising over 95 per cent of the population) only one-fifth of the elderly get pension and among these more than half get less than Rs 500 (even after adding the State Government contribution).

There must be a universal and non-contributory National Old Age Pension System by the government with a minimum monthly pension of not less than Rs 2000 per month for all those over 55 years of age indexed to inflation and the APL / BPL or any other criteria should not be used for exclusion except to exclude those receiving non contributory pensions equal to or higher than Rs 2000 per month from some other source.

Single women: According to the Census, more than 7.4 per cent adult women in India were single. About 27 million households, constituting 11 per cent of total households in the country, are headed by women. The figure will increase if the number of "customarily" separated women and those whose husbands are missing added. So far the recognised categories of single women are widows and divorcees. But there are a large number of other women who are single but invisible. Despite their lower attainment in many indicators and vulnerability, there are very few laws and government schemes for single women. Many a times, the existing schemes remain out of reach due to lengthy and cumbersome formalities. Society also generally ostracizes single women and cruel caste and community traditions restrain them from living a life of dignity.

There is a need to increase, universalize and re-define the pension for widows. Widow pension should be extended to all widows 18 years and above and to all vulnerable women – divorced, separated, abandoned, ostracized, etc.

WOMEN IN GOVERNMENT PROGRAMMES: Women continue to be unpaid and underpaid in Government's Flagship Programmes. **A notable trend in recent years is the growing reliance of government programmes and schemes on unpaid and underpaid labour of women.** Several government flagship programmes are implemented through service providers at the forefront who are almost always women. The most important example possibly is that of Anganwadi Workers (AWWs) and Helpers (AWHs) under the Integrated Child Development Scheme (ICDS) and of Accredited Social Health Activists (ASHAs) under the National Rural Health Mission (NRHM). They do not get minimum wages or any other benefits and are contract "community activists", not recognized as workers. For the variety of activities that they are required to execute, their 'remuneration' remains exceptionally low, and work conditions are dreadful. What is most disturbing however is the categorisation of their work as 'honorary' or 'voluntary'. This nomenclature further rationalizes the total lack of support

structures, making these women extremely vulnerable to exploitation. Under pressure from the relentless struggle of federations of women workers across the country, notably under CITU, some limited measures have been taken by the Union government, and consequently by the state governments, to partially address the concerns on insecurity of employment and low wages. These measures notwithstanding, many issues persist. **The government should recognise workers like AWWs/AWHs and ASHAs as workers to be paid full wages and other benefits and regularise their services.**

MICROCREDIT: Currently the single largest public policy measure for promoting women's economic activities is to provide microcredit for promoting self-employment among them. According to the information supplied by the MFIs themselves to the AP Government at the time of registration, the effective rate of annualised interest was as high as 60.5 per cent (Basix) with India's only listed and largest commercial MFI putting it at 31 per cent (SKS Microfinance Ltd). This is unreasonable, but if ADB is correct, it is an underestimate. ADB reports that **"the nominal interest rates charged by most MFIs in the region range from 30% to 70% a year...The effective interest rates are even higher because of commissions and fees charged by MFIs. Other factors-such as the compulsory deposits for obtaining a loan, frequency of repayments, and the systems adopted to collect repayments-also raise the effective interest rates."** The suicides were an outcome of the usurious interest, multiple loans at ratcheting costs, and harassment by MFIs. Women have had a bitter experience with private micro finance institutions (MFIs) who behaved like moneylenders and financial sharks. By focusing almost exclusively on microfinance, the state transfers its responsibility of providing employment to women by insisting that they undertake their own economic empowerment through "assisted" self-employment.

AIDWA has demanded that **the coverage of the SHG bank linkage programme should be expanded and direct credit by banks to SHGs should be part of the priority sector.** Interest subsidies on bank lending to SHGs should be increased through higher budgetary allocations for SHGs so that their repayment rate does not exceed 4% per annum. Women from vulnerable social groups like dalits, tribals and minorities should receive credit at interest rates that do not exceed 2% per annum. But, above all, **the expansion of formal banking is essential in order to check the growing segmentation of the banking sector.**

FOOD SECURITY: Endemic hunger continues to badly affect a large section of the Indian people. The International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI)'s Global Hunger Index (GHI) places India in the category of nations where hunger was 'alarming', ranking 66 out of the 88 developing countries. IFPRI estimate of the hunger index for the 17 major states in 2008 (more than 95 per cent of the population of India), put 12 into the 'alarming' category, and one into the 'extremely alarming' category. High levels of hunger are seen even in high growth states. Expectedly, the backward Eastern and Central region has the worst performance.

80 per cent of the rural population, 64 per cent of the urban population, and 76 per cent of the total population suffer from inadequate calorie and food consumption. More than half of India's women and three-quarters of children are anaemic, with incidence among pregnant women an even higher 59 per cent. The proportion of underweight children remains at around 48 per cent for the past 20 years. 30% infants have low birth weight. One in every three adult Indian has a body mass index (BMI) below 18.5 indicating chronic energy deficiency (CED).

The obvious strategy to tackle hunger and malnutrition is to universalize and strengthen the Public Distribution System (PDS) by making adequate food available at affordable prices. The Government must scrap targeting; universalize the PDS and delink entitlements from the Planning Commission's wobbly poverty estimates; include commodities like pulses, sugar, cooking oil and kerosene at subsidized rates; incorporate all food and nutrition schemes of the Central Government such as the mid-day meal scheme and ICDS nutrition programme in the proposed legislation. But the Central Government insists on retaining the highly unjust targeted system of dividing the poor into APL and BPL and denying them the right to food. In this system, anyone earning more than 26 rupees a day in rural India and 32 rupees in urban India, is non-poor to be excluded from subsidized foodgrains.

The fact is that the Government is once again holding over 65 million tones of foodstocks, three times over the buffer norms. Since perverse fiscal policy does not permit its distribution, the holding in excess of storage capacity (roughly 20 million tonnes) is lying in the open, and often rotting even as vast sections go hungry. As targeting is not going to reduce these stocks, the bizarre situation of hunger amidst overflowing stocks will persist. This offers a golden opportunity for universalization by distributing a minimum quantum of food at affordable prices to larger numbers across the country, and in the process to expand the PDS. **Those who want to reduce subsidies will of course argue that foodstocks should be reduced through open market sales and exports and future procurement should be reduced sharply along with targeting only the poor. This has to be resisted because as far as money is concerned, it is entirely a question of prioritization.** The fiscal deficit is Rs 40,000 crores less than the tax foregone by the Central Government on Corporate Income Tax, Personal Income Tax, Excise and Customs at over Rs 5 lakh crores in this FY alone, adding to a staggering 20 lakh ++ crores in the past 5 years. It is four times the requirement for a universal PDS with 35 kgs per household at an average price of Rs 2 per kg.

This Government has been completely unsuccessful in controlling price rise of essential commodities which have persistently increased every year because of faulty Government policies such as permitting speculation through future trade in agricultural commodities; cutting down subsidies on petrol and diesel and frequently raising their prices through decontrol, while collecting huge taxes on them. The price of rice, wheat, sugar, edible oil and pulses has increased by 20 to 30 per cent. Even the price of vegetables has increased.

POLICY APPROACHES: Targeted Approach: In the past 20 years or thereabouts, several governments have tried to integrate concerns for gender equality through targeted

programmes, directing some measures exclusively for women, and adopting gender auditing as a mechanism to design more gender-sensitive policies. However, growing visibility aside, the outcome is far from satisfactory. The targeted programmes for women have been relatively ineffective and in fact undermined by the broader macroeconomic policies which have signaled a retreat of the state from the provision of universal, affordable and free social and economic services like food security, health, water & sanitation, child care, etc.

Fiscal and macroeconomic policies are obsessed with expenditure curtailment on subsidies and public services accompanied by huge tax incentives to the corporate sector. **Vital areas of public spending like universal and affordable provisioning of food, health, education, sanitation, transport, power, roads, etc. must receive greater support. This is more important for the overall condition of women than a mere focus on women-targeted programmes through gender budgeting.** Banking policies have to guarantee more credit to small producers in all sectors. The assumption underlying current policy approaches that output growth in itself will generate the required employment is belied by the fact that the problem has intensified. **There must be a shift to a macroeconomic strategy of wage and employment-led growth that is countercyclical and generates positive multiplier effects for income, employment, and ensures more stable and robust growth.**

UID-enabled Direct Benefit Transfer: Direct cash transfers are fast being projected as the new mantra to overcome all the problems of inefficiency, corruption, and leakages that assail public services in our country today since the state's efforts to provide services like food distribution, health care, and education have failed, these efforts must be replaced by direct money transfers with which people can freely buy these services from the market. The poor should get money electronically in their account every month, with which they can buy food of their choice. For this purpose, the Government will transfer the subsidy amount to a UID/ 'Aadhar' number linked smart card in the first week of every month which can be used through a human micro-ATM or BC.

However, the argument for the shift from delivery of kind to cash is fraudulent and fraught with several pitfalls.

- 1. Pitfalls of targeted cash transfers:** Since the government proposes to transfer cash only to families living below the poverty line, the problems of identification and exclusion will remain. The criterion used to demarcate "poor" and "non-poor" households is greatly flawed, and has been used to exclude large sections of deserving poor from the list of beneficiaries. The proposed solution of continuing with flawed BPL criteria and lists, but replacing the food items with cash transfers can hardly address the problem of exclusion due to targeting.
- 2. Deregulation of food prices:** Once cash transfer scheme is introduced, the prices of food and other commodities and services would be deregulated and left entirely to the market forces. Clearly, the amount of cash transferred to identified households would not be commensurate with rising prices. In times of rising prices, introduction of cash transfer will reduce consumption and further push up prices.
- 3. Risky link to dubious UID/ 'Aadhar' number scheme:** It is proposed that the cash transfer scheme would be linked to the biometric UID number. The biometric technology of the UID is unproven and the cost of implementing and maintaining a UID database unknown. The fingerprints of manual workers keep changing and the acknowledged failure rate is 7 to 10 per cent. The prerequisite infrastructure requirement is huge. The problems of acquiring BPL cards exist after years of introduction of the TPDS. How can acquiring a new smart card that would be linked not only to the PDS but also to all other subsidies and welfare schemes get any easier? Entitlements under the PDS cannot be used for experimentation with the UID scheme.

4. Unviable in a patriarchal society: There is no guarantee that Direct Cash Transfers will actually be used for buying the commodity for which the cash is given. In a situation where patriarchy dominates, it is likely that the money may be used for other purposes, as women do not enjoy much control over expenditure. Under direct provisioning in kind, there is at least a guarantee that some commodities and services reach poor households and is under the control of women.

5. Risk of further shortages: The very minimal assumption for cash transfer is that there are no supply side problems. In the case of food, for example, speculation, futures trading, hoarding and faulty export-import policies are aggravating local and regional shortages. Due to its obligations under the Public Distribution System, at present the government purchases vast amounts of food grains directly from farmers. However, the government has failed to spell out its procurement policy in view of the proposed cash transfer scheme. Would it continue to procure in large quantities or would it abandon farmers to the mercy of the market? The latter case will surely spell further doom for the agricultural sector.

6. Pilferage is possible even in cash transfers: There is no guarantee that cash transfer is free from leakages and pilferage. The implementation of schemes that are based on cash transfers to bank accounts like NREGA, old age pension, widow pension, etc show that the problems of corruption and undue delays continue. Other schemes where 'cash' has replaced 'kind', like providing cash instead of school uniforms in Delhi show that parents get anywhere between Rs.200 to Rs.400 instead of the prescribed amount of Rs.600. Linking food to UID/ 'Aadhar' number along with bank accounts is only likely to increase procedural and other problems. The middlemen or "BCs" and "micro ATMs will interface creating new avenues for leakages.

Direct Cash Transfer for food is not appropriate for India that is characterized by mass poverty, high incidence of malnutrition, and huge gender, caste and other disparities. When it comes to essential services like public distribution, education, or health services, replacing them with cash payment would aggravate exclusion and do little to mitigate corruption or poor delivery. It is the responsibility of the state to deliver on fundamental rights of people.