

Feminisation of Poverty and Empowerment of Women **- An Indian Perspective & Experience**

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Feminisation of Poverty & Empowerment of Women - An Indian Perspective & Experience

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I. Understanding Poverty:

Poverty has been an issue of vital concern in India since independence. The pace of poverty reduction in the past decades - despite comprehensive and mammoth schemes - has been slow. While achievements such as increased life expectancy need to be acknowledged, one cannot lose sight of the fact that the fight against poverty has not yet been a successful one. Today, the largest number of the global poor live in India - 40% of 1.3 billion poor worldwide. Although the relative number of poor people in India has increased from 200 million people in 1950 to 312 million in 1994 (36% of the Indian population)¹

The proportion of population living in poverty and the trends in poverty in India are contested issues. Yet, there is a consensus amongst Government and other organisations that poverty continues to be a major problem confronting the country²

Conceptualising Poverty:

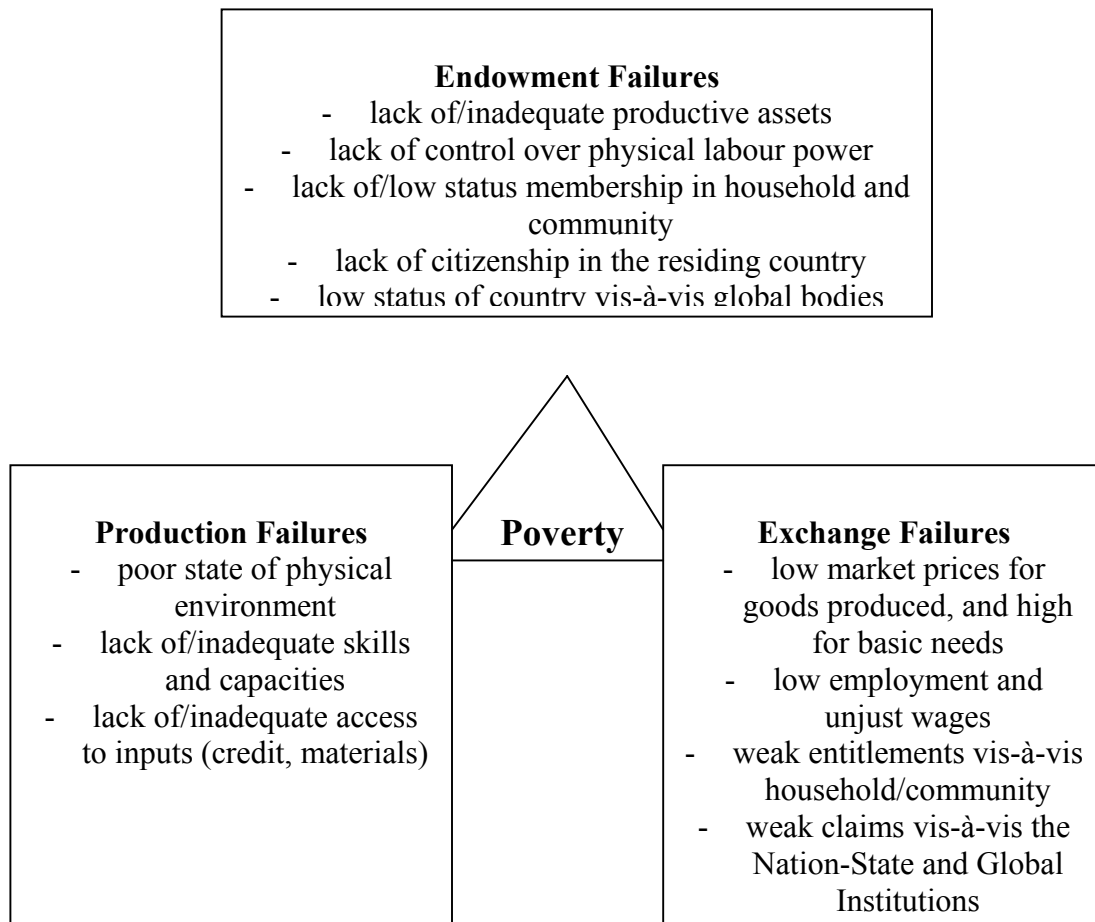
There is a general consensus that the poor can be defined as those who are deprived of basic human needs required for their well being. But, there are different points of view on what exactly are these basic needs. The Indian Government equates poverty with the tangible dimensions of deprivation, i.e., lack of access to food, nutrition, clothing, shelter, water and basic education, and uses "food deprivation" in particular to identify the poor from the non-poor³ (Planning Commission, 1979, 1993). However, The Human Development Report, 1997, brought out by the UNDP, questions such a narrow equation of poverty with material deprivation. It argues the need for broadening the definition of poverty to include deprivation in terms of creativity, freedom, dignity, self-esteem and the respect of others

¹ Page V, Preface.

² Page 1.

(UNDP, 1997). Others, like Chambers (1998), draw attention to a few additional intangible dimensions of deprivation: vulnerability, powerlessness and isolation⁴

A. Failures Leading to Poverty:



Source: Adapted from Murthy and Rao (1997), pp. 19

The main cause of poverty are the shortfalls in the ownership entitlements, endowments, production and exchange options of the poor and different poverty groups (ref. above

⁴ Vulnerability is manifested in the uncertainties surrounding survival strategies of the poor, their lack of capacity to cope with crisis as well as the seasonal dimensions of poverty. Powerlessness is reflected in their compulsion to rely on relationships of exploitation, whether based on caste, class, gender or ethnicity, to meet their basic needs. Rural India is full of examples of poor men & women working in virtually bonded conditions, yet treasuring these relationships for the little security that it gives them. Finally, the poor are often isolated from each other. Most of their work is individual - based and geographically dispersed. Fully occupied as they are in eking out a living, they have little time to change their situation collectively - *Addressing Poverty Indian NGOs and their Capacity Enhancement in the 1990s* by Ranjani K. Murthy & Nitya Rao, Published by Friedrich Ebert Stiftung.

Figure); due to their weak bargaining power within existing social relations and institutions (Murthy and Rao, 1997).

Further, institutional exclusion based on Gender is one of the main cause of making women more poor among the poor. In Indian context lack of basic needs (food, health, water, shelter, literacy, employment, etc.), isolation and powerlessness are understood as belonging to poverty group.⁵

B. Different Forms of Institutional Exclusion Based On Gender:

Some of the key gender specific causes of poverty in Asia include the gender differences in (Heyzer, 1992):

- ➔ Endowments and ownership of assets.
- ➔ Kinship pattern.
- ➔ Access to credit, inputs and extension services, training, etc.
- ➔ Access to employment, wages and terms of employment, and bias in division of labour and work burden.
- ➔ Access to household, community and state resources: particularly food, education and health.
- ➔ Access to public decision-making.
- ➔ Legislation.
- ➔ Space to organise and claim rights.

These gender specific factors do not operate in isolation. They interlock with other forms of inequalities to keep particular groups of women in a disadvantaged position. The social positioning of women within household as well as public life makes many of the above inaccessible to her, that too independent of men.

C. The Calorie Intake Definition: Government of India Approach:

As Planning Commission views "food deprivation" as the most hideous form of deprivation, consumption expenditure to meet the minimum calorie intake required for

⁵ *Addressing Poverty Indian NGOs and their Capacity Enhancement in the 1990s by Ranjani K. Murthy & Nitya Rao, Published by Friedrich Ebert Stiftung.*

survival (2100 & 2400 kilo calories respectively for the rural and urban population) has been used since the 1970s as the norm for identifying the poor (Planning Commission, 1993)⁶

Thus, minimum food required to produce sufficient calorie energy in an adult for rural and urban environment fixed (about 2,100 for rural & about 2,400 for urban). Those not able to get this minimum are said to be below poverty line.

Within the poor household, due to patriarchy and male chauvinist values, the men are given priority in serving food and other needs thereby women getting the least. This makes women in poor households the poorest of the poor. The gender dimension of poverty can be seen in men getting better basic needs satisfaction compared to women.

II. Feminisation of Poverty:

An institutional approach draws attention to the fact that deprivation is experienced differently by women and men, girls and boys. Women occupy an unequal position within different institutions of society.

It is frequently asserted that 70 per cent of the world's poor are women (UNDP, 1995 and UN, 1996a). Slightly more modestly, the UNIFEM states that 'women constitute at least 60 per cent of the world's poor'. Poverty is experienced more severely by poor women than poor men with the resultant feminisation of poverty due to less access to food, education and health care, unequal inheritance rights, lack of equal opportunities, etc. Poor women's ability to overcome poverty is much lower (i.e., shortfalls from what is required for survival are often more for women than for men). Explanations for the incidence and severity of poverty and its feminisation⁷:

- Female-headed households are disproportionately represented amongst the poor households.

⁶ *Addressing Poverty Indian NGOs and their Capacity Enhancement in the 1990s by Ranjani K. Murthy & Nitya Rao, Published by Friedrich Ebert Stiftung.*

⁷ See Safilios-Rothschild, (1991), Heyzer, (1992, 1993), Bardhan, K, (1993), Heyzer, N, (1994), Sen, G, (1994), Kabeer, (1994), UNDP, (1995), Buvinic and Gupta, (1997), World Bank, (1994a, 1995a), Baulch, (1996).

- Women and girls have less access to food, education and health care than men and boys. Hence, they may face poverty more severely than men.
- Basic infrastructure and environmental degradation have a more adverse impact on women's work burden than men's, given the former's responsibility to fetch fuel and water, leading to reduced health status.
- Gender-specific processes. For example, given unequal inheritance rights, earning opportunities and returns to labour, women's economic position is highly dependent on men. They slip into poverty while their husbands remain non-poor.
- Lesser means - assets, skills, employment options, education, legal resources, financial resources - to overcome poverty than men, and are more economically insecure and vulnerable in times of crisis.
- Women disproportionately bear the burden of structural adjustment.

The proponents of feminisation of poverty theory seem not only to be arguing that the incidence of poverty is increasingly severe among women than men, but also that some of the dimensions of women's poverty are different from that of poor men. So are the causes of poverty. Their ability to overcome poverty is much lower.

The domination of market forces under globalisation and privatisation has aggravated the marginalisation of women and poor. The inability of the poor to respond to market mechanisms, their lack of bargaining skills and strengths, competitive processes make them doubly exploited.

The social conditioning of men and women, the role stereotype together with social values and customs, confinement to household boundaries and responsibilities even while going to work outside to earn wages and income has made women scattered and powerless. Poverty, ignorance, social conditioning and values make the rural poor women most vulnerable to under development and domestic violence.

III. Feminisation of Poverty, Violence and Women's Rights:

<u>VIOLENCE</u>	<u>RIGHTS</u>
↵ Domestic violence	Right over one's body
↵ Alcoholism	
↵ Marital Rape, Broken Families	
↵ Dowry* Harassment & Dowry Deaths	Right to choose & Property Rights
↵ Rape	
↵ Girl Child Marriages & Early Marriages	Right to develop, Right to Education
↵ Girl Child Abuse	
↵ Sexual Harassment at Workplace	Control over one's sexuality
↵ Female Foeticide & Infanticide	Right to decide
↵ Forceful Abortions & Miscarriages	
↵ Sexual Abuse & Assaults	Right to freedom, liberty
↵ Homicide	
↵ Family Planning	Reproductive Rights

Violence Against Women such as domestic violence, rape, girl child abuse, female foeticide, and infanticide, etc. are directly related to the lack of various Rights for them, particularly, when they are poor, marginalised and unorganised. Alcoholism in India is identified as one of the major factors which contributes to domestic physical violence and broken homes. The lack of access to justice because of poverty, powerlessness, social conditioning and ignorance makes the life of rural poor most miserable.

IV. Poverty Alleviation & Empowerment Strategy:

In Indian context it has to be a two pronged strategy of addressing both women's immediate Practical Needs as well as Strategic Needs centred around self-managed and self-reliant grassroots organisations of the poor women at village level and upwards as well as horizontal networking.

* Giving money or material by the bride's party to the bridegroom's party during the time of marriage in India.

IMMEDIATE NEEDS

- ☞ Food
- ☞ Water
- ☞ Shelter
- ☞ Clothing
- ☞ Health facilities
- ☞ Education
for
- ☞ Employment

STRATEGIC NEEDS

Women's Rights.

*Institutional Arrangements:
self-managed & sustainable
institutions at different levels,
institutional arrangements*

*support services & gender
friendly policy frame.*

The above division is not absolute but done only for a better understanding and to develop a strategy. In reality, both needs are interlinked. Most of the NGOs have been focussing on the immediate needs while the rights groups have been stressing on the strategic needs. A twin edged approach with the combination of the two is necessary to enable the women enjoy and sustain the results of development input. Reducing the burden of women is a key factor in enabling them to move forward.

GRAMA VIKAS MODEL:

GRAMA VIKAS, a NGO rooted in the drought prone rural villages in Mulbagal Taluk, Kolar District, Karnataka State in South India started working from mid 70's. Beginning with health and nutrition programme for poor children in the age group upto 5 years, it realised the need to support the children till they become healthy and educated adolescents to join the mainstream educational system. In the process they realised the need to involve the parents to manage the programme. Grama Vikas, with experiences realised the need to facilitate the integrated development of the poor families in order to eventually make the programme self-sustaining with people's contribution and local self-management.

From early 90's Grama Vikas started giving special emphasis to rural poor women by organising them into village level Sanghas* (village level organisation of women) and initiated series of development and basic needs programmes in order to address the immediate practical needs of women. With the advent of micro-credit activities through women Self-Help Groups (a SHG is a group of about 20 persons involved in their own

* Sanghas means Groups.

savings and taking loan from their own savings to begin with. As they graduate Bank - credit linkage enables them to get credit for income generation activities and further scaling up). Grama Vikas facilitated the rural poor women to form SHGs. Further, to facilitate self-management by the poor women and enable Grama Vikas to transform its role from the initial promoter to that of a supporter, it facilitated the SHGs to form an apex body "Grameena Mahila Okkoota" (Rural Poor Women's Federation).

Addressing Strategic Needs:

With experience and gender sensitisation Grama Vikas realised the need to address the strategic needs of women without which they learnt that what is seen as development would only burden women. Therefore, from mid-90s Grama Vikas started addressing both practical and strategic needs of women. From gender awareness and sensitisation within and among the poor women with whom it worked, Grama Vikas built the capacity of women at the village and federation level to address social issues such as girl child marriage, dowry menace, wife beating and other forms of violence against women. The organised and empowered women started addressing such issues from counselling to group and social action. In doing so Grama Vikas approach was to empower the women in a most socially sensitive village and societal situation without giving scope to destabilise the families. Further, Grama Vikas through various programmes and through positive impact of women based development activities impacted on men as well. *This enabled the poor women not only to get out of their traditional confinement to four walls of their dwellings but increased their social mobility.* This does not imply that all men have begun to treat women as equal human beings in every aspect of life. But one can affirmatively say that the preconditions to move towards gender equality have been achieved. Today the Grameena Mahila Okkoota is poised to become self-managed and sustainable with its own identity and networking with other such rural poor women federations.

Wider Role and New Horizon:

Grama Vikas and Grameena Mahila Okkoota, in the process of growth realised the importance of much wider networking of federations at the district and state level in order to impact at the policy level. The Grameena Mahila Okkoota's anti-liquor campaign

together with other organisations did not yield much results since it involves State Government Policy change in this regard. This and similar other experience has inspired Grameena Mahila Okkoota with the support of Grama Vikas to network with other federations at the State Level. Backed by similar thinking other NGOs and Development Activists and with the initiative of Grameena Mahila Okkoota and Grama Vikas 130 SHG rural poor women Federations representing over 3,00,000 members met at the end of December 2001 and formed a State Level Confederation for mutual solidarity, mobilisation, awareness creation and policy advocacy. This would help to create a macro level support environment to grassroots level efforts to empower the rural poor women.

Collaborative Strategy:

The Grameena Mahila Okkoota and Grama Vikas have realised that the development efforts cannot succeed in isolation from the efforts of the "State". Further, there is a gradual realisation among the policy makers that effective participation of people is necessary for the success of any Government programme. When it comes to the participation of women, there is now a general realisation that without empowering them it cannot be realised. The Government on its part has opened up for collaborative efforts with NGOs and peoples organisations in certain areas such as watershed, tank rehabilitation, Joint Forest Planning and Management and micro-finance. Interfacing with Government and collaboration to implement some Government programmes beneficial to the poor and campaigning against wrong policies is the approach of Grameena Mahila Okkoota and Grama Vikas in addressing the development needs and issues. Such a critical collaboration necessitates "autonomy" of the Grameena Mahila Okkoota. Making Grameena Mahila Okkoota an autonomous and sustainable institution through self-reliance is a challenge for Grama Vikas as well as Grameena Mahila Okkoota.
