

Selected papers presented at

DAWN's African Regional Meeting

on Food, Energy and Debt Crises in Relation to Women

Institute of African Studies

University of Ibadan

27th-29th September 1988

Development Crisis and Indian Women

After the initial DAWN exercise for highlighting the nature of the crisis facing third world countries and its differential impact on their women, it was generally agreed that the movement for a new alternative to development processes has to be essentially political in nature because it requires an active intervention at the level of policy making and execution. Such a movement, to be effective must be formulated within the specificities of each region, taking account of the particular problems facing women and the barriers and handicaps that obstruct their redress.

It had been decided that such a study for South Asian countries should be initiated and coordinated by me. Unfortunately in the last one year or so, the political relations between Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and India have not been very conducive for frequent meetings and exchange of ideas. I have therefore used this time mainly to formulate my ideas about the specific issue of Indian women.

As you would appreciate it, India itself constitutes an amalgam of several very large and varied sub-regions and there are several distinct patterns of women's position operating under its general rubric of women's subordination. My work so far has thrown up some ideas for explaining these regional patterns as well as the general logic of the system of subordination as it operates in India. I have put down main points of this as an indication of the direction of the work so far.

1. In the case of India, the most unambiguous indicator of the impact of development on women is the fact that from

1921 onwards, there has been a steady and distinct fall in the proportion of women in the total population of the country. The date is important because it coincides with the beginning of two main trends of development. It is from this period that for the Indian economy, the process of modernisation and assimilation with world economy started working at an accelerated pace. Secondly, population began to rise at a steadily faster rate.

2. While this coincidence in time of development process and falling sex ratio SR (No. of women per 1000 men) is very important, it must also be stressed that within India there have always been regions where there was a deficit in the number of women in the 19th century. What is more, there is a regional pattern about the relative levels of S.R. which has held good for over a century or so for which we have data. In other words, there have always been areas like North West India where there is a shortage of women. This longstanding pattern of differential between regions indicates that development alone is not responsible for the falling S.R. Rather the Indian women's situation is such that development process of the kind that we are undergoing reinforces the bias against women and its regional specificities.

This hypothesis is strengthened by the fact that within the pattern of regional variation in S.R. there is a further pattern of the way the deficit comes about. In some regions the deficit is mainly due to a relatively higher mortality rate of female infants and children. In others it comes about through greater female deaths in early reproductive age (20-30) or in some others in late reproductive age (30-45).

3. Apart from regions, one can also detect a pattern in the relative S.Rs of different communities. Very roughly, one can say that in rural areas, there is less difference in sex wise child mortalities amongst Muslims than Hindus. Amongst rural households landless households have a better sex ratio for children than asset-holding households. In tribal communities, women suffer a disadvantage but mainly in later, that is, in post 30 age groups. All these patterns have remained fairly steady for the entire period since 1921.

4. Over the last ten years there has been some improvement in the all India S.R. The factors that have brought about this improvement are itself region specific. For example though Rajasthan, Punjab, Haryana and U.P. all fell in the same low child S.R.belt, the decade has brought about a significant improvement in the general S.R. of Punjab and Rajasthan (though not in child S.R) but not in Haryana and U.P. Of these U.P.'s case can be attributed partly to growing poverty but for Haryana no such explanation is forthcoming.

Again, the question is what aspect of the development process have brought about those changes and how they can be reproduced in other regions.

Work Force Participation and Status:-

It is generally argued that in India women's relatively low chances of survival are because of their state of economic dependence. Because women's participation in productive work is low, they have a low status within the family. As a result girl children are neglected; women get less access to food, nutrition, and medical help because they are regarded as non-productive.

The regional variations in S.R. are attributed to the fact ^{that} women's work force participation rates (Wfpr) also vary from region to region. To support this hypothesis, there is a significant positive correlation between region-wise levels of female Wfpr and S.R.

^{However,}
~~Moreover~~ this hypothesis linking women's status to work leaves some questions unanswered. (a) The original differences in women's Wfprs between regions are themselves elusive. If one adds women's unpaid work even when it is recognised as productive, the correlation does not hold good. If one further adds women's household work which we consider as value generating, the correlation becomes negative though not so significant.

More significant, the idea that work gives women status in the family, is somewhat incongruous with what one observes in the society. In almost all regions, women's overt participation in productive activities is considered to cause a loss of status to the family.

Also, there is a very clear tendency (which has been brought out by many field studies as well as analysis of official data) that women's work is undervalued. More precisely not only women's occupations are paid relatively poorly but if an occupation shifts from men's sphere to women's it gets degraded and low valued.

Thirdly, women's work in India is generally considered secondary to her housework. Housework has a priority over other work to the extent that jobs that are assigned to women have to be consistent with her housework and complementary to it.

The hypothesis suggests the existance of a relation. The available evidence, even when supportive, does not spell out how the process works. Most studies suggest that ^{women's} status in the family comes through age and delegation of authority to her by the head of the household whether as wife or as mother. There are customary sanctions for either but within each family, The head of the household has the power to decide. In general, in propertied households, there is less chance of a woman getting full authority.

More relevant to our present study is the fact that the ~~regimence~~ ^{recent} changes that have come about in women's Wfpr through development are not closely related to changes in S.Rs of different regions. The impact of development on women's Wfpr has been much more marked in some states like Bengal or Kerala. The entire tradition of women's industrial work was broken down in the years ~~since~~ ^{since} 1911. But these are not necessarily the states where S.R. has fallen relatively more.

The hypothesis relating women's Wfpr to S.R. is more indicative than explanatory. It is equally likely that this connection can be explained by the simple fact that working women have some access to money and/or food and therefore get better nutrition and perhaps health care and also extend it to their daughters. That is why unpaid work does not influence S.R. since it does not give similar advantages to women.

The hypothesis is nevertheless important because it focuses attention on work and points to some connection between impact of development on women and their work. We therefore have to look closely at what is women's work in India.

Sexual Division of Labour(SDL)

A remarkable thing about the Indian SDL is its highly flexible and changeable character. There are very few jobs that have not been entrusted to women at the same time in some part of the country. Nor is it uncommon to find that within a generation, the entire idea of what are women's jobs can change absolutely radically in any part of the country or in any community. Moreover though census data shows that only 10 percent or less households are women headed, there is a very high percentage of households where women earn nearabout half or more of family income. Nevertheless in almost all parts of India, the only independent responsibility given to women with social sanctions is of housework. In all other tasks even if women do the major part of the work involved, they are rarely if ever given the dignity of being independent producers. Nor are they expected to claim any share of the produce of such activities. Their succour is always considered to be the responsibility of men of the family - father, husband or son.

Along with this, marriages are ^{early} only and universal with the expectation that a woman would switch her total loyalty and energy to the husband's family. For this sole career of marriage open to her, her training is for some housework but mainly for building up attitudes by which she would unquestionably accept the work and work conditions given to her by the in-laws. It is a part of a deliberate design that they have no particular skills or roles.

Rather they have to be flexible enough to assist, supplement or even substitute for any work that the family needs. In case the family is short of any goods or services,

it is automatically the duty of the woman to provide it by her own efforts. Therefore she is expected to build up no career oriented skills or to specialise in any one occupation. The more smoothly she can manage to switch between roles and tasks the better she is regarded.

In the Indian context therefore, housework has no boundaries. All this supplementary work that women do as and when needed arises is subsumed in that category and often remains unmeasured, unpaid and un-recognised. What is more, there is no mechanism for adjudging its permissible load or to match it by due recognition in terms of providing necessary assistance or appropriated tools or better techniques.

This complex set of arrangements regarding work gives rise to the general image that women in the Indian society, a woman has only reproductive tasks and is economically dependent. Therefore whatever her reproductive capacities are not in demand as in the case of widows or the communities where there is a strong pressure to control fertility for preserving property, the woman's survival becomes of low interest to the family.

On the other hand, in households where her labour is necessary ~~for~~ in productive activities, it is always regarded as supplementary and therefore to be done in addition to her primary reproductive work. Its value and its load tend to get underrated.

Regional Variations:

The tendency to leave women's work unspecified and undervalued has meant that its load can vary sharply between regions, communities and technologies. In areas of poor man/land ratio, like Western and Central India or specially labour intensive productive activities and techniques, there is a greater participation of women in productive work and a long

standing tradition of this participation leads to its recognition by society. Whether it gives status to women or not, it gives them some income with which they are likely to eat better and feed their girl children better than in households where they are not recognised as workers and get no income for work. In groups and areas where outside labour is plentiful and cheap as it was in the poverty-surrounded rich area of Bengal at the turn of the century, women were kept at home for greater elaboration of their nurturing activities. In still other areas like West Central India where main household activity tended to be long distance trade or military operations as in North West India, women had relatively less role in household activities. In more primitive groups which had less developed traditions of private control of productive assets as in tribal communities, the emphasis was more on each individual providing for himself or herself with some joint social responsibility for looking after children.

One can divide India into some broad regions according to the pattern of women's work as it has evolved out of long traditions of ecological and economic development. This is the regional distribution of regions by levels of S.R.

In each region, it is likely that before the period of accelerated development, the load on women was within manageable limits. In each case, there was a traditional image of work that women did which involved specialisation with respect to local resource endowments and the pattern of local productive activities.

Development and Women

The nature of recent developments has however affected this long standing equilibrium:

- (a) The development process makes excessive demands on natural resources with the result that water, fuel, fodder all became difficult to obtain. Since this is

a part of women's unspoken household duties, the increased load is not taken into account. It enters no cost benefit calculation for choosing alternative schemes of development.

- (b) As India continues to accept unquestioningly technologies developed in countries with different kinds of resource endowments, employment becomes a diminishing function of capital investment. The people who are not absorbed in modern activities have to scrounge around for a minimal living. In most of these poor families, it is the responsibility of women to make up this fast widening gap in subsistence incomes.
- (c) The Indian state invests relatively little resources in provision of social services like health, education or nutrition. The targets for these investment plans moreover are in terms of creating physical assets - more school places, hospital beds etc. The access of poor families to these services is limited and their distribution at the intra-household level continues to be according to the traditional values of preference to males.

Therefore, in the Indian system, the work-load on women is increasing disproportionately fast. However, the society and their families continue to regard their housework as non-work and their other activities as supplementary, thereby denying them the status of a ^{worker} ~~worker~~ and provider.

At the other end of the scale, the absence of traditions of teaching women career-oriented skills means that they do badly in competition with men in the labour market. They have few options in self-employment etc.

The increased work-load on women which is not compensated by an enhanced social or familial status has made serious inroads on women's health and would account for the falling trend in S.R.

On the other hand, the few and sporadic improvements that have become apparent in S.R. and women's life expectancies in selected regions can be shown to have arisen due to some public efforts to reach basic social services to women as well as to give them economic independence . This has required a positive stance on the part of the public authorities and points to the importance for demanding state help for specific issues relating to women's work-load, its recognition and compensation or alleviation.