
Impact of Development on Women

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Abstract

In India, in the name of development the very people who are totally dependent on life resources are alienated from the same. The fisher folk are weighed down when the sea is contaminated with the DDT, disturbing the life web of the seas. Likewise the life of the tribal communities is threatened when deforestation is carried out on a massive scale. Again, it is the tribal that are destabilized by mega hydro projects or excessive mining of the forest. In the same way, the dalits and peasants are wretched while their only source of livelihood, the land is made infertile by exorbitant use of chemical fertilizers and pesticides. Of all these oppressed people, it is women that are most affected by the development economy. It does multiply their work load, affect their economic self sufficiency, curb their mobility, creativity and push them back to "home" to carry out their traditional role as women.

Keywords: fisher folk, dalits and peasants, self sufficiency, Human Development Report, feminization, globalization

Introduction

According to Human Development Report, (1993) women are the world's largest excluded group. Even though they make up half the adult population and, often contribute much more than their share to society, inside and outside the home, they are frequently excluded from positions of power. They make up just over 10 per cent of the world's parliamentary representatives, and consistently less than 4 per cent of cabinet ministers or other positions of executive authority. Women participate inadequately in important, industries and in some industrial countries, women's earnings are less than half those of men. Indeed, for decades, life has changed very little for 500 million rural women in the developing world. From the 1950's to the 1990's, the position of women particularly in economic structures was either forgotten or omitted, the voices of women's movements were neither properly heard nor registered adequately.

The negative impact of development on women may be categorized as follows:

- Devaluation of women's work and knowledge
- Impoverishment and feminization of poverty
- Weakening of women's opportunities
- Displacement of women

Devaluation of Women's Work and Knowledge

According to the age-old sexual division of labour the main tasks of women are to bear and rear children and do other household duties within the four walls. Even in 1974 Gray Becker remarked that men marry women "to bear and rear children as women have superior skills for this task.¹ But the industrial and technological revolutions, ushering in rapid economic development and women's gradual access to modern education have taken them outside their four-walls and given them cash instead of housekeeping. Numerous studies have documented that women are not only efficient farm managers but have higher levels of concern for the environment in general and in respect to specific environmental issues.

But the persistence of gender inequality within the household represents a challenge to the full integration of women in the process of production. On family farms, production for household use is often not counted as productive labour, it is considered as an extension of reproductive labour. Thus, the wide spread discrimination against women is clearly apparent. The discrimination is manifested in non-employment of women in low-paying marginal jobs with little scope for upward mobility and lower wages than men with similar work and with no decision making power, where ever they are engaged in production. While men gravitate towards the emerging modern sector, women have tended to be relegated to the informal sector, the traditional economy and the domestic economy. Thus women to a large extent may be able to retain and put to use the indigenous knowledge and women continue to be strongly represented in activities that use local indigenous knowledge more directly.²

In many South Asian Communities, women often know more than men about traditional crop varieties and they play a vital role in the conservation of crop genetic varieties. In tribal and hilly areas, women are usually the main seed selectors. But unfortunately because of globalization, their traditional knowledge has been completely devaluated. Also, profit has become the dominant determinant of human behaviour displacing the wisdom of sustainable living, based on ethical values and holistic knowledge about the traditional communities. Apart from this, women are devalued with the present day market-totalitarianism that subsistence production and extended production become dichotomized. All women who produce for their families, children and nature are thus treated as non-productive, as economically inactive. Self sufficiency in the economic domain is therefore seen as economic deficiency when economies are confined to the market place. The devaluation of women's work, and of work done in subsistence economies in the Third World, is the natural outcome of a production boundary constructed by capitalist patriarchy.

Household work is not only exploited freely, without any labour laws, it is excluded from the GNP, and it is also not considered when people talk of a labour market, because only employment and the work for a wage have entered the labour market. Women's work is

¹ Beulah J.M. Rajkumar, "Women and Science and Technology," Women and Society, ed. Nirmala Jeyaraj, Madurai: Vanguard Press, 2002, p.187.

² Ibid.

considered as informal sector, because it is believed that household work is unproductive. The irony is that, the housework is productive when performed by a paid domestic servant and non-productive when no payment is done. When the food is cooked and is sold, it is active labour, whereas when it is not, it becomes economically inactive labour. In the same way, those who care for children in orphanages are occupied. This is how the international economic system constructs reality which excludes the major parts of women's work such as reproduction, raising children, domestic work, and subsistence production.

Impoverishment and Feminization of Poverty

Women are the backbone of their families, pillars of community life, care givers for the sick/elderly, and primary caretakers of the next generation. In addition to managing households, securing and preparing food, many work in farms, factories, market places, mines, offices, etc. But much of these works is unrecognized, invisible and unpaid. In the third world countries over 800 million people continue to live in absolute poverty, three fourth of whom are women and children. They produce income and assets in economy but are frequently forgotten or dropped out of development or environmental strategies at all levels of national and international activity.

A study from western Uttar Pradesh in India shows that collecting fuel is an important daily chore for most rural women. For collecting 1.74 tonnes of firewood every year, each firewood gathering household spends an average of 2.51 hours daily making 172 trips a year with each round trip measuring to 8.54 kms. But these very tough works are not taken into account for the GNP. It is thus evident from many studies that the effects of technological changes in agriculture, animal husbandry and aquaculture have not been often beneficial to rural women engaged in these activities.

The U.N conference on decade for women emphasized the importance of alleviating the daily burden of rural women by introduction of appropriate intermediate technology. The International Conference on population and development held in Cairo in 1994 called upon the world community for a new global commitment to make women full partners with men in social, economic, political lives of communities.

Weakening of Women's Opportunities

In the present day, where society is inextricably linked with science and technology, women's lot may seem improved both at home and in the work place. This is because mechanization has taken over much of the repetitive and time-consuming work. One of the major contributions of technology for women is the more effective birth control techniques that are now available. This reduces the time spent on child-bearing and rearing as women can decide when to have a baby. Advancement in technology has enhanced the participation of women in the kind of work that had predominantly been done by men.

On the other hand it is also true that mechanization has predominantly caused women to suffer unemployment. Studies of farm house-holds, in several states in India, which use agricultural technology, show that when the income of the family reaches a certain level, most women keep away from the work place and from managing the farms. The women who do work

are from the poorer sections and find only seasonal work such as transplanting, weeding and harvesting. Another example where women are adversely affected because of the use of technology is in the fishing industry. The use of trawlers, machine fabricates of nylon nets and mechanized boats have replaced more traditional methods. The women are deprived of the job of net making and fish marketing which now attracts big traders who sell by auction. Also, the retrenchment of women from textile industries throughout the country has been due to rapid mechanization. In cases where the machines work on a shift basis, a woman is rarely employed as the perception is that she cannot work the night shifts.

Shawhney (1982) in his study proved that increased mechanization in farming has led to mass retrenchment of women agricultural labourers for it is they who did most of the weeding, transplanting and winnowing before the arrival and use of labour-saving harvesting and processing machines. Also Brandtzaeg (1979) in her study on India has said that new technologies are developed and managed by men and so training and new jobs are also reserved for men. The belief that women are not equipped to handle heavy machines has kept them away from learning this technology and has permanently widened the skill and wage gap between men and women.³ The basic gender wise stereotyping of work remains unchanged.

Displacement of Women

The technological interventions have affected women by displacing them from their traditional areas of employment. Particularly, agriculture is a prime example of the displacement of women on account of technological introduction. Sandhya Venkateswaran cites the case of rice processing, an important source of female wage employment, which, with the introduction of rice milling, left widespread destitution among the women who were involved in the manual husking of rice.⁴ Earlier women milled the grain by hand on stone flourmills. But today even in grain processing, the mechanized grain processing mills, usually employ only male labourers, completely displacing the women who earlier carried out such tasks. Not only is mechanization ecologically harmful but also it has led to a widespread displacement of women, often forcing them to migrate to distant states where they work under appalling conditions. Gabriele Dietrich argues that since the mid-seventies struggles went on against trawling and for protection of artesian fisher folk from fishing through trawlers. Later the depletion of fish resources through the use of outboard motors instead of traditional crafts also had to be faced. She says that side by side the women of the community had massive struggles against mechanization of net making and use of nylon nets instead of cotton, which deprived them of a very modest but nevertheless essential source of income.⁵ Therefore, she feels that both struggles are based on similar factors: while trawling and mechanisation replaced the artisanal knowledge by mechanical power which

³ Beulah J.M. Rajkumar, op.cit.

⁴ Sandhya Venkateswaran, Environment, Development and the Gender Gap, New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1995, p.165.

⁵ Gabriele Dietrich, 'The World as the Body of God,' Women Healing Earth, ed. Rosemary Radford Ruether, London: SCM Ltd, 1996, p.84.

requires high capital and energy inputs, net making by machines did away with women's work as superfluous drudgery. Both the mechanised fishing and the machine-made nets have been ecologically harmful and have contributed to depletion of fish resource.⁶ And the existing gender dynamics are such that only men have access to the jobs created by mechanisation. In the same way, commercialization and modernization of agriculture has forced the women to low wages and unsatisfying jobs. Since the new technologies demand the presence of more permanent, trained labour force, men have monopolized and occupied these jobs. As a result, women have been displaced into low paid, unskilled casual labour force; men have monopolized and occupied the trained labour force. It is true that simple technologies like weed killers and threshers have completely displaced female labour. When women are displaced from particular jobs on account of mechanisation, there is loss of employment, which often results in destitution. As a result, women have to struggle hard for their daily survival. Gabriele Dietrich when talking about 'Development, Ecology and Women's Struggles', emphasizes some of the overriding features in the development concept, which connect the perpetuation of poverty, the marginalization of women and the destruction of the environment.⁷

The displacement of women workers from the industrial sector through technological changes was due to several reasons such as women did not get access to learning modern skills; more importantly, women were considered incapable of handling energized machines. Also factory production required a workforce which was mobile between rural and urban areas and could accept regular work hours and a long working day outside home. Traditional systems of female subordination typically limit women's access to and control over the productive resources of land and labour and impose sexual divisions of labour (in which women's work is accorded lower status) and restrict women's physical mobility.

The process of modernization adversely affected women workers because in the traditional division of labour they had been largely confined to manual low productivity tasks in subsistence industries. The very character of their tasks had made them ideally unsuited for large scale production and swift mechanisation in the process of development. In the 70s' and 80s' there have been several developments which have reversed this trend to a certain extent. In each of the South Asian countries, several light industries have come up and expanded fast. Examples are ready-made garments, sports goods, leather ware, umbrellas, processed foods, electronic goods and their accessories. In all of these, women are finding work in increasing numbers. However studies⁸ of these industries everywhere have all come to a similar conclusion viz. that though these industries are mostly non-traditional and outwardly oriented, "women

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Gabriele Dietrich, "Development, Ecology and Women's Struggles," *Social Action* Vol. 38, Jan – Mar 1988, pp.4-5.

⁸ For example, Indian Council of Social Science Research "Women in Export oriented Industries," Reports on Projects under the Indo-Dutch Research Project, New Delhi, 1983. H. Hussain, R. Jahan and S. Sobhjan, *Industrialisation of Women Workers in Bangladesh* in N. Heyzer *Daughters in Industries*, APDC Kuala Lumpur, 1988.

working in them remain concentrated in insecure, casual, low-paid, female stereo-typed jobs.⁹ Entry into the modern sector has not helped women to break the existing traditions of sexual division of labour. In fact that, in spite of the expansion of women's employment even in some modern sectors in most countries, the basic pattern of gender wise stereotyping of work remains unchanged. Apart from this, one of the main reasons for the preference given to women in the newly developing industries is the fact that they prefer to work as casual, temporary or seasonal workers with highly specific skills. Majority of these new industries are fiercely competitive and face highly price elastic demand conditions. There is therefore a general reluctance on the part of the entrepreneurs towards making substantial investments in fixed capital and mechanized production processes. It is for this reason that there is preference for manual processes and use of docile female labour which is regarded as less troublesome in case of quick closures and uncertain work prospects.¹⁰ For women therefore prospects of work are essentially uncertain and it is quite likely that when prospects improve and entrepreneurs begin to invest more for greater productivity, they would prefer to employ male workers. This is why women's participation in the growth process is subject to greater fluctuations.

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